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AFFINITIES

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AFFINITIES

A Romance of To-day

BY

MRS CAMPBELL PRAED

AUTHOR OF 'ZERO' 'POLICY AND PASSION' ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON

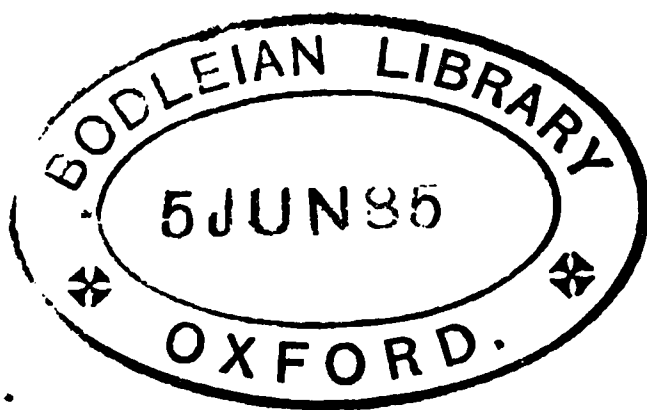
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AFFINITIES.

CHAPTER I.

MAJOR GRAYSETT and COLONEL RAINSHAW had been in the same regiment in India. They had gone out there together; but Major Graysett remained on service some time longer than Rainshaw. The latter went home on sick leave, married an heiress, sold out of the army, and settled himself very comfortably in one of the Midland counties, on a property which had been bought with his wife's money. He did not, however, lose sight of his friend; and when, three or four years later, Graysett found himself in England,

almost the first invitation he received was to Colonel Rainshaw's place, Leesholm.

The visit was arranged under what seemed attractive conditions—good pheasant-shooting, a small party of pleasant people in the house, and a hunt ball in the neighbourhood.

Graysett travelled down by an afternoon train. It was almost dark, therefore, when he arrived at Leesholm ; and a raw evening, with a blustering wind and snowy clouds. The building seemed, as he approached it from the back, to be large, rambling, and of the Tudor style of architecture, with low mullioned windows and irregular gables. It was built of pallid gray stone, which in the dim light gave it an almost spectral appearance. The east front looked out upon a prim pleasure-ground, bordered by a high yew hedge, cut at the corners into pyramidal shapes, which stood out sombrely against the

leadens sky. An apparently unused, three-aisled avenue stretched in a straight line beyond the ha-ha; but a bend in the approach, bringing the visitor to the principal entrance, showed him an addition to the structure, of later date and more imposing proportions. On the west side might be seen an extensive prospect of smooth lawn and trimly kept shrubbery, and beyond, in the hazy distance, lay a flat, well-timbered park, over which the gray mist was stealthily creeping.

An owl hooted from an old tree near, as Graysett drew up before the portico. He shivered. Though not impressionable in everyday social matters, his temperament was susceptible to atmospheric influences, and to those of scenery and surroundings; and he was struck now by a certain weirdness in the aspect of the place and of the evening. Possibly, he reflected, this might arise from

the fact that he had for long been unfamiliar with the details of an English wintry landscape.

He got down from the fly in which he had driven from the station—for, the time of his arrival being uncertain, he had requested Colonel Rainshaw not to send for him—and paused for a minute before ringing. Again the eerie feeling seized him as he looked along the broad carriage drive, above which the naked boughs interlaced, spreading a misty fretwork against the sky. The ground was covered with a light sprinkling of snow, whiter upon the turf than where an array of empty flower-beds stretched in a fantastic pattern upon the lawn. There was a dampness in the air which told of a coming thaw; and the wind blew in fitful gusts, moaning plaintively through the trees, and round the gray spire of a church close by. Ghostly white patches lay upon the evergreen shrubs and the funereal

yews, against which the snow had drifted ; while every now and then a flake, loosened by the blast, would hover for a moment and noiselessly fall. A watery moon had just risen, cold and round, concealed at intervals by driving clouds, and shedding broken reflections upon the gleaming ground, and on a stretch of ornamental water shadowed by drooping beeches.

The windows of the house were closed and shuttered, only here and there a light twinkled ; but he caught a faint sound of melancholy music, a waltz air which he did not know, played dreamily and in uncertain time, two long notes quivering in suspense as it were, and then an impassioned turn in the melody, swelling louder and gracefully dying away, like some magic strain of mysterious import. The music, which had indeed a certain wildness and beauty, due perhaps to the manner in which it was played,

impressed Graysett so powerfully that he lingered in the porch till it had ceased, hesitating to break its charm. Then another gust swept chilly round him, driving a branch of dripping ivy against his face, and almost drowning the bell's muffled peal.

The outer door swung open, and he was ushered into a hall, warm and harmonious, and flooded with soft light from a great blazing fire and several rose-shaded lamps—a pleasant contrast to the glassy paleness and wintry desolation without. The hall was of the conventional type—old oak carving, deep window seats, Chippendale tables, willow-patterned plates, brass dogs on the wide hearth, palms, bulrushes, and peacocks' feathers in tall blue vases, screens of faded leather, and tapestry *portières*. It was like a dozen other halls of the same design, and almost oppressive in its want of originality but for the traces it gave of recent occupation—library

books, newspapers, crewels, a sketching-block, and an easel on which rested a canvas with a lightly dashed in girl's head. Just now the place was deserted, but the sound of voices and of grown-up people's laughter, and again snatches of that pathetic, mysterious waltz air, floated down from some upper room or corridor. The servant withdrew and Graysett waited, enjoying the luxurious warmth, and reflecting that his friend had made for himself a very comfortable nest.

‘If the wife be only in keeping with the good things her money has purchased,’ he thought, ‘I might be tempted to follow Rainshaw's example, and give up the fancy I've had all my life, that a twin soul is wandering about the world waiting till mine claims it as a mate.’

He gave a little laugh, and stooped to caress the dachshund which came rubbing

against his legs. Then he looked at the drawing upon the casel, and while thus occupied became aware of steps upon the stairs, and went forward to meet his host.

‘ Well, Rainshaw, I’m glad, indeed, to be with you again. You see I’ve managed after all to get down in time for dinner. One forgets how easy travelling is in England, and what a distance one can fly over in a day, if trains fit. One forgets, too, what a dreary, ghost-like effect moonlight and snow produce, and how horribly cold a winter’s night may be. In fact, there is so much forgotten in all ways, that it is pleasant to find oneself remembered by an old friend. You are looking well.’

There was a great contrast between the two men. Rainshaw had a thoroughly English face and physique; he was broad-shouldered, muscular, and ruddy-complexioned, with blue eyes, and light hair and moustache. Gray-

sett, though not less athletic or soldier-like, was dark and sallow, with refined features, deep-set brown eyes, and a more thoughtful expression of countenance. He looked worn, and his skin was transparent, as though he had been for some time out of health.

Rainshaw shook hands delightedly with his friend.

‘I am sorry to say that I cannot return the compliment, old fellow. What has been the matter with you? Jungle fever?’

‘Something of the sort,’ answered Graysett carelessly; ‘but I have quite got over it. I am perfectly well.’

‘Well, if not, we will soon put you all right. Let me introduce you to my wife.’

There came forward a handsome, ‘well-got up’ young lady, who had followed Colonel Rainshaw down the stairs. Her hair, of the fashionable bronze, was touzled in front, and

drawn upwards from the nape of her neck. She wore a very mediæval-looking tea-gown, and carried a great fan of peacocks' feathers. But her dress, her designedly dreamy gaze, and affectation of deep earnestness, were in odd contrast with a briskness of movement, solidity of form, and frank address, which would have suited a young English country girl to whom life was a very pleasant and material fact.

Mrs. Rainshaw greeted her husband's comrade with flattering warmth, offering him tea, sherry and seltzer, and all kinds of refreshment.

'You've had a long journey, haven't you?' said she. 'Of course I don't mean from India—that's too far to think of. *I* never got any farther than Nice; and it was while we were wintering there that I met Tom, and my mother persuaded me into marrying him, by promising me as many dresses for my trousseau as Queen

Elizabeth had in her wardrobe. I wonder why mothers want their daughters to marry as soon as they are out of the schoolroom. I'm sorry I had so many dresses, for I might have considered that I should have been able to buy them for myself afterwards. Now all that I can do is to buy things for Tom—at least he buys them and I pay for them,'—and her girlish laugh and frank smile at her husband, as though the whole affair were an excellent joke, prevented Graysett from thinking then of the bad taste of the remark, though afterwards it occurred to him that there might be drawbacks to the pleasure of marrying an heiress.

'I daresay that you heard us laughing,' continued Mrs. Rainshaw. 'We have been behaving like a pack of children, playing at games in the Long Gallery. It began most seriously with thought reading; and each person willed that somebody else should do

something extraordinary. And I must say that Lady Romer did make an impression upon Mr. Margrave, and he looked decidedly queer when she told him what he was thinking of; but I said that I'd have nothing to do with mesmerism and mediumship and all that horrid stuff—I know one man who was turned into an atheist by it—so we played magic music instead. I'm going back to start a paper chase, which will give us all a little exercise before dressing time. Now, Tom, it's all very well for you to frown and call me hoydenish; but if you had married straight out of the schoolroom, and if you had to entertain a set of county frumps this evening, and to ask them how their children are, and to talk about clothing clubs and mothers' meetings, and all sorts of dank subjects till you felt like a fly in a honey pot, you'd be glad enough to fortify yourself by a romp beforehand. I suppose

that you're used to county people and to being improved, Major Graysett, or were before you went to India, and that you would be too sedate to join us.'

Major Graysett assured her that such was not the case, but declined the invitation as he was evidently expected to do ; and then looked round with a view to making some appropriate remark upon the adaptability of the house to such amusements.

They had gone upstairs and were standing in a quaint kind of anteroom, into which several doors opened. Through an archway Graysett caught glimpses of more oak carving and blue china, and of a tortuous panelled corridor. He saw that Leesholm was an old and irregularly built house, which had been furnished according to modern lights by someone terribly nervous about anachronisms. As at least two periods seemed clearly indicated, the

task could not have been without its difficulties. This he observed to Mrs. Rainshaw.

‘Oh!’ she exclaimed, ‘it’s despairing to anyone with a sense of harmony—not that I am harmonious; but, as everybody seems to think so much about their houses and their furniture being in keeping with a period, I thought it would be the correct thing to get up an enthusiasm about. I didn’t know that I shouldn’t have everything clear before me till after I had begun to fix up the old place. I fancied that, as long as a house was ancient, all the parts were bound to match, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. One had an idea, you know, that people in those times kept to their century, and didn’t try to go backwards or forwards. That’s all a mistake; they jumbled up their centuries just as much as we do; and as we’ve got more to choose from, why, we have decidedly the advantage of them.’

Mrs. Rainshaw stopped and laughed in a way that was infectious.

‘I had set my heart upon being Queen Anne and nothing else,’ she went on. ‘The front is all right; it’s this part that is mixed. I did this room myself; do you like it? But I must have a Grandfather’s Clock for that corner. I suppose it ought to be inlaid; what do you think? I know that I’ve got out of my period.’

‘Isn’t everything just what it ought to be?’ said Graysett. ‘I am sure all looks delightfully harmonious.’

‘Yes,’ she assented doubtfully, ‘except, perhaps, those two arm-chairs. Spindle-legged seats are beautifully early—though that’s rather out of fashion now; but they are so uncomfortable.’

More peals of laughter floated down from a higher level.

‘They are waiting for me,’ cried Mrs. Rainshaw; ‘good-bye! I am sure, Major Graysett, that, although you look rather severe, you’d like me to have my little bit of play before I do my lessons this evening. If you come down early I’ll tell you who everybody is.’ She ran away, but came back to say, ‘Tom will show you where you are to go, and will take care of you for the present, Major Graysett; I’ll put myself in charge afterwards. I must consider while I am dressing who I shall send you in to dinner with. I could not decide how you were to be paired till after I had seen you. I promise to give you someone nice. You shan’t have a frump.’

‘Now that you have seen my wife,’ said Rainshaw as the pretty vision finally disappeared, ‘you will be less surprised that I did not want to go back to India. It is hardly fair to ask your opinion.’

‘She is charming,’ replied Graysett warmly. ‘As frank and unaffected as a child. I congratulate you upon having got a real good thing out of life’s lottery.’

‘I knew you’d understand her. She is a child. I begin to think that I was rather a brute to take advantage of her innocence. But I fancy she is very happy, and I always let her say just what comes into her mind. I like her to be perfectly natural.’

Colonel Rainshaw conducted his guest along some curious passages which apparently belonged to what Mrs. Rainshaw called the mixed part of the house, and left him in a cheerful bachelor’s apartment where a bright fire burned, and an arm-chair stood invitingly near the hearth.

‘I hope, old fellow, that you will forage for anything that you want. I see that they have unpacked your portmanteau. That’s all right.

You'll hear the first gong presently. As you don't know your way about, I'll come round after I've received my marching orders for dinner, and pilot you down.'

It was, however, earlier than they imagined, and before the first gong sounded Graysett was already dressed. He seated himself in the arm-chair by the fire, and, leaning back, fell into a reverie. He was tired, and was conscious of nervous excitement unusual with him. He had travelled from Scotland that day, and though to Rainshaw he had made light of his recent illness, it was certain that the fever had left traces, both physical and mental, upon his constitution. Among its effects of the latter kind were a vague sadness and dissatisfaction with the world, a keener susceptibility to music, and to the influence of nature, and some romantic and poetic tendencies, to which he had

heretofore been a stranger. He had now a curious illustration of this fact. The melody of the waltz which he had heard upon his arrival had lingered with extraordinary vividness in his memory, and seemed at this moment to reproduce itself in the air of his chamber. . . .

Slowly, with expression.

The musical score is written for piano and consists of three systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The first system begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a crescendo (*cres.*) and then a decrescendo (*dim.*). The second system continues with a crescendo (*cres.*) leading into a decrescendo. The third system features a decrescendo (*dim.*) followed by a ritardando (*rit.*). The piece concludes with a final chord in the bass staff.

CHAPTER II.

COLONEL RAINSHAW knocked twice at Major Graysett's door before he received permission to enter. As soon as he went in, it became evident to him that something strange and discomposing had occurred during the interval. Graysett was standing by the chimney-piece, his head bent and his face very white. He looked up. There was a dazed expression in his eyes, and he started violently, seeming at first almost unable to collect himself, when Rainshaw spoke :

‘Are you ready, Graysett?’

‘Yes,’ replied the other in a dreamy way.

‘I have been ready for some time.’

‘Sit down then, and let us yarn for a few minutes. You don't catch me in the drawing-

room before it's absolutely necessary to put in an appearance. It's the English country gentleman's privilege, which he gains as soon as he marries, to be let off hanging about doors and saying civil nothings. We had a dose of that sort of thing in our aide-de-camp days, eh, Graysett?'

'We had indeed,' rejoined Graysett mechanically.

'I tell my wife that I have had enough of the "superior footman" business, and that she must manage social arrangements for herself. Pulling the bell, ordering the carriage, acting valet upon occasions, and doing master of the ceremonies generally—that was about it, wasn't it? Do you remember how his Excellency used to funk taking in old Lady Whalley at the dinner parties; and how he swore at the table of precedence?' Rainshaw laughed at the recollection. 'I feel much in the same

mood when we entertain what my wife calls the county frumps. However my lines are cast in pleasant places this evening. Aren't you well, Graysett? Knocked up perhaps with walking over the moors. Let me send for a sherry and bitters to pull you together.'

'Nothing, thank you. I'm detaining you; don't mind me. I shall be myself in a few minutes and will follow you downstairs.'

Graysett made an effort to resume his usual manner. He waived Rainshaw's offers of restoratives, and to some extent succeeded in allaying the anxiety of his friend, who however refused to leave him.

'There's plenty of time. I met Judith Fountain on the landing going up to dress—your destiny for this evening by the way. She will be the last to appear. It is a fashion of hers to keep everyone waiting while she is in one of her dreams.'

‘Do you believe in dreams, Rainshaw?’ asked Graysett abruptly.

‘About as much as I believe in the manifestations at a dark *séance*. You don’t know Lady Romer? She is staying here. I made her very angry not long ago by telling her that her spirit faces were no more than phosphorised bullocks’ bladders. It’s a fact I assure you. A medium once let me into the trick.’

‘But one has heard and read strange things about dreams,’ persisted Graysett. ‘It is known that they have foretold events.’

‘I only know that I once lost a considerable sum of money through backing a dream event which didn’t come off in reality,’ said Rainshaw. ‘I have fought shy of dreams ever since. I don’t remember you of old as going in for that sort of thing, Graysett. But you will be quite in harmony with some of the ladies here; and I see that Molly showed more dis-

crimination than I gave her credit for, when she coupled you with Miss Fountain.'

Graysett made no reply. He seemed to be thinking deeply.

'Haven't you any curiosity about your destiny?' said Rainshaw. 'I felt inclined to pity you, for in my opinion Judith Fountain is one of the most stupid girls for whom I ever tried to make conversation. She has no go in her whatever. Yet she is sought after, because in the first place she is good-looking, after a rather uncanny style ; and, in the second, as someone puts it, "A vast fortune doth buy for her consideration."'

Graysett made two or three sudden paces up and down the room, then halted before his friend. Rainshaw, surprised at something strange and excited in his appearance, exclaimed—

'What is wrong with you? You don't

look in the least like yourself. Have you seen a ghost? I'm not aware that the house is haunted, but we'll make inquiries. There hasn't been time for you to fall asleep and dream a dream.'

'That's the curious part of it,' said Graysett. 'That's what baffles me. It's altogether strange, and I suppose my nerves have been a little shaken by that fever. Look here, Rainshaw,' he added excitedly. 'I can't make out your house—I can't make out whether I have been dreaming or not. Just come in here for a second.'

He crossed to the opposite wall and threw open a door, revealing a small narrow room panelled in oak, with a writing-table, a few severe-looking chairs, and two or three old-fashioned cabinets. It looked something like an oratory, and did not appear to communicate with any other part of the house.

‘Has this room any outlet except through mine?’ asked Graysett.

‘No. That’s the nuisance of it. We can only use it as a sitting-room.’

‘There’s no *portière* painted in imitation of modern tapestry, with a representation of the sleeping Endymion, concealing a door——?’

‘Certainly not. The only hangings in the room are those window curtains of crimson silk.’

‘The door leading into an oblong sort of anteroom, lighted from above, the wall covered with Japanese figures, as far as a dado, which runs all round, and is formed of Japanese plates sunk in a dead gold ground——?’

‘A dado of Japanese plates!’ exclaimed Rainshaw. ‘My good friend, we are nothing if we are not Early English. As for the anteroom, all the walls of this little excrescence are outer walls, except that which divides it from your bedroom.’

‘ I’ll go on with my description. I want to know if there’s any part of your house which answers to it. At the end of the oblong room are double doors, one of them inlaid after the Japanese style. There are also some fine Japanese bronzes ; but the other furniture is utterly incongruous with the prevailing style. The cabinets are Florentine, and scattered about are pieces of *bric-à-brac* which might have been chosen haphazard in the shop of any London curiosity dealer. The incongruities however don’t end here. The outer door opens into a sitting-room panelled in white and gold, each alternate panel a painting of wreaths of flowers and Cupids after Boucher. Here everything seems intended to correspond with the rest, but utterly fails. Forgive me if I wound your susceptibilities. Several of the pieces are glaringly out of harmony. There is a Pompadour cabinet—a so-called Marie

Antoinette writing-table—a couch drawn up by the fire with a satin *couvre-pied* embroidered in wreaths of roses——’

‘My dear Graysett,’ interrupted Rainshaw, ‘what does all this mean? You are describing the boudoir of some heroine in a French novel; assuredly nothing that you will find in this sober English country house. Come, what is the mystery? Is it a dream or an hallucination? Out with it.’

‘I believe that it is a warning,’ said Graysett solemnly.

‘Let me hear it. Perhaps you are not aware that there is a society in London devoted to the investigation of all branches of supernatural phenomena. I will introduce you to Lady Romer when we go downstairs, who will be happy to place you in communication with the secretary to the committee of inquiry into dreams and portents.’

Graysett laughed. 'I have never considered myself a subject for phenomena. Seriously, I have had a dream or a vision—I can't say which—that has made a most uncomfortable impression upon my mind. I don't know of anything which ever before laid such a grip upon my imagination. I cannot get over it. I'll tell you exactly what I saw or fancied ; and if by laughing at me you can drive away the queer, squirmy sensation that has taken hold of me, I shall feel grateful to you.'

They went back to the bedroom. At that moment a gong echoed through the corridors.

'Go down,' said Graysett. 'I'll tell my tale another time. Mrs. Rainshaw and your guests will be impatient.'

'No, no. The butler knows my ways, and always allows me ten minutes' grace, and

Judith Fountain is good for another ten. Go on.'

'I suppose it was a dream,' began Graysett; 'but I don't remember feeling in the least sleepy, and I am not in the habit of napping in an arm-chair. I dressed directly you left me, and was sitting here by the fire waiting for you to come back, thinking about you, your wife, and your home, and how pretty and cosy your hall looked when I came into it out of the snow and moonlight. I kept fancying that I heard a waltz someone was playing upstairs when I arrived—a melancholy, fanciful thing. It was curious how the tune stuck in my memory, for I had never heard it before.'

'Ah!' said Rainshaw, 'Judith Fountain's waltz! Yes, I know. She was playing it just as you came, for a sort of thought-reading, "magic-music" game. An odd connection of ideas! She always declares that she did not

compose it, but that she heard it in a dream. Anyhow, it has become very popular, and you will probably dance to it at the Holmborough ball on Wednesday evening. Coote and Tinney have got hold of it. Well?'

'Someone knocked at the door,' continued Graysett. 'Supposing that it was you, I called out "Come in, Rainshaw." But, to my surprise, there entered a man I had certainly never seen before, though I should recognise him again in an instant, under any circumstances or after any lapse of time.'

'What was he like?' asked Colonel Rainshaw with a practical air.

'A large man, very tall, and of great breadth of chest, with a way of tossing back his head so that attention was called to his statue-like throat. He had a smooth-shaven face, rather classical features, and sensuous, Greek lips. He reminded me of a statue in the

Louvre, I think of the young Alcides. There was a good deal of intellectuality in his face, and of fire in his blue eyes when he opened them fully, which did not seem to be his habit. The most striking thing about him was his hair. It was not red, and it was not gold, but something between the two; and he wore it very long and brushed back from his forehead. It was curly, and stood out at the ends like——’

‘The tail of a chestnut cob in full gallop,’ coolly interjected Rainshaw; ‘I know. You have described Esmé Colquhoun to a *t*. And now I have got the clue to the whole thing. But let us have your story to the end.’

‘Who is Esmé Colquhoun?’ asked Graysett with interest.

‘Have you been living quite out of the world? Punch’s Platonic Poet,’ returned Rainshaw drily. ‘He has been down in his luck lately. Surely you must have seen the

correspondence in the newspapers a little while ago. Don't you know how, when sensation is slack, the public and the press have a way of lashing themselves into a fury of excitement over a mere nothing? Some social personages fancied they had been gibbeted in a novel. It might have been you or I—a perfect storm in a tea-cup. But that gave an impetus to the pendulum; and a reactionary movement generally goes beyond the mark. Then it was discovered that our poet had lost all his money in a rotten investment—a bubble scheme floated by a pair of knaves, who made Esmé their dupe. The saw-mills were burned down, and the whole thing exploded. I need not enter into particulars. You will hear rather too much about Esmé Colquhoun presently from the ladies who are staying here. He is still a god to a certain set of worshippers.'

'Whoever the man may be, he had in my

dream a strange and most unpleasant power of fascination,' said Graysett gravely. 'He crossed before me to the door of that inner room. I felt constrained to rise and follow him. We passed through the Japanese room which I have described, and into the Louis Quinze boudoir. I seemed to halt for a few moments on the threshold of the door, and while I did so the scene photographed itself, as it were, on my brain. The apartment was evidently that of a refined and luxurious woman. All sorts of knick-knacks were scattered about. On a chair lay a mantle of some rich material, apparently not long taken off. There was a bunch of yellow roses upon the carpet, crushed and drooping, and giving out the strong perfume of dying flowers. At one end of the room there was a raised alcove—a window recess, approached by a step, and draped with curtains of blue satin, the borders embroidered like the coverlet on the sofa.'

‘But the woman, the woman!’ cried Rainshaw. ‘Skip those details, though your dream must have been singularly vivid to have taken in all such particulars—the pattern of a cabinet, the embroidery upon a curtain, the perfume of roses.’

‘It is this which gave the whole thing such ghastly reality,’ said Graysett, shuddering slightly. ‘The woman was lying upon a sort of divan in the window recess. One arm supported her head, which rested against a pile of cushions. It was thrown back showing her throat, and her eyes were closed. Her form seemed tense, and her whole attitude had the abandonment of one not mistress of herself. Don’t you know how in a dream a fact forces itself upon one’s intuition? You don’t reason, you *know*. I *knew* that the woman was dying some horrible death; that this man was her husband and that he had killed her.’

Graysett paused, and lifted his hand to his

forehead which was damp with perspiration. 'It is horrible!' he ejaculated. 'I feel as though I had seen a murder!'

'Describe the woman,' said Rainshaw, now deeply interested.

'She was dressed in a kind of brocaded robe, of a curious yellow colour, the reflection of which on her face made it look corpse-like. She moved her head a little, and opened her eyes, looking first at him and then at me. They were very large, unearthly, gray eyes. The face altogether, apart from its lividness, was remarkable, and had a beauty difficult to define; it was terrible and yet angelic. A great quantity of golden-brown hair was gathered up above the forehead. I should know that face if I did not see it till my dying hour. I hope the look she gave me will not haunt me till then. I never saw such eyes. They seemed to be gazing into another

world. . . . But, great heavens ! the horror, the tragedy of them ! It is indescribable. I had not the power to speak or move ; I seemed under a spell. I knew she was in deadly peril, and I could do nothing to save her. I fancied she was entreating me. The sense of helplessness was frightful. A clammy sickness came over me ; my very bones quaked. The feeling was something more awful than can be told or imagined. Then in a moment everything had gone, and I was here, alone, shaking and faint. It was a ghastly dream—if, indeed, it was only a dream.'

'What else do you suppose it could have been ? A dream, and one very easily explained,' said Rainshaw, putting on a didactic and practical air. 'I told you that I had a clue. Isn't it in a novel by Wilkie Collins that a most weird and portentous dream is traced back, link by link, to the impressions made

upon the dreamer's brain by the day's events? I'll trace your dream in the same way. To begin with, your nerves are shaken by that fever, which has altered you, Graysett—I see it now—more than you are perhaps aware of. You dropped asleep when in an uncomfortable position, chilled with your drive, cramped by railway travelling, and probably fasting. This is quite sufficient to account for the nightmare-like feeling of clammy horror. Judith's waltz had turned your imagination into a melancholy channel. On your way down you read this evening's 'Globe,' in which there is a long article upon Japanese art. The same paper contains an account of the De Brissac sale, which suggested your Louis Quinze room. You dreamed of Esmé Colquhoun—no one could mistake your description. He is a noted man, and, although you don't remember it, you have heard him talked of, or you have seen his

photograph in the shop windows, or—why, of course—one of Pellegrini's caricatures, or Du Maurier's society pictures has stuck in your memory. Now I think of it, there's a cabinet photograph of him in the hall, and your eyes unconsciously rested upon it while you were waiting till we came down. As for your lady, if you rack your brain sufficiently you will find her in another or the same shop window as Esmé Colquhoun, or in some picture gallery through which you have been lately strolling. Now have I satisfied you?'

Graysett shook his head. But he moved to the door with the manner of one who, having unburdened himself upon a certain subject, wishes for the present to have done with it. 'At all events,' he said, 'there's no use in arguing out the matter. I have kept you too long already; let us go down. I admit that your explanation, from the materialistic

point of view, ought to be satisfactory. I begin to suspect that I am rather a fool, and that you are right in attributing the alteration in me to the effect of my illness. I *have* changed during the last few months, and I never realised it so strongly as I have done since I entered your house. This is a bad prelude to my visit. I'll try and forget my dream, and be a more agreeable companion. But I can't shake off the impression that sooner or later I shall come across that man and woman.'

'Nothing more probable in the case of the man. You may meet Esmé Colquhoun any night of your life in London. As for the dream-lady—now what sort of thing should you do if you identified them both?'

'I can't say. Probably warn her against him.'

'That would make rather a good "Hard Case" puzzle,' said Rainshaw thoughtfully.

‘What should a fellow do? It would depend upon how far he believed in that sort of thing, wouldn’t it? Belief or no belief, *I* should hold **my** tongue, watch events, and reason. For, you see, if it is fated that a certain thing is to happen, warnings and botheration cannot prevent it from happening. That’s the philosophical way of looking at the point. And, hang it all, you know,’ cried Rainshaw energetically, ‘you wouldn’t think much of a girl who was ready to give up the man she loved because a stranger had dreamed something unpleasant about him. At any rate, it would take something more than a dream to turn a good many women against Esmé Colquhoun. He’s “a dealer in magic and spells;”’ Rainshaw softly hummed a few bars from the *Sorcerer*; ‘platonic attachments so-called, and that sort of thing. I am not saying anything against the fellow. Some people

declare that he has a fine and unusual talent for virtue.'

Graysett laughed mechanically.

'But I suspect,' continued Rainshaw, 'that Esmé Colquhoun is sufficiently worldly wise to prefer a reigning sovereign to one discrowned. That's a practical sort of philosophy. Well, when your vivid imagination identifies your dream-heroine, as it assuredly will do, with the first good-looking girl to whom you see him paying attention, I'll pull a grave face and refrain from chaffing you. In the meantime let me give you a hint. Talk to Miss Fountain about your dream, and you may perhaps find her more interesting and more interested than my experience has proved her to be. I am told that she has queer theories about affinities, presentiments, psychic force, and all that rot, and that these are the only subjects about which she ever gets up any excitement.'

CHAPTER III.

A CHEERFUL hum of voices filled the drawing-room when the two men entered. They were not the last, though, as Rainshaw perceived, Miss Fountain had been before them. The butler was awaiting the arrival of a spinster from the neighbourhood in order to make his announcement. Mrs. Rainshaw had already marshalled her guests, and with the exception of one gentleman and two ladies, all the couples had been told off for dinner.

These exceptions were a young married woman and a young girl. The former was thin and willowy, with a rather long face, a pathetic smile, big intense eyes, and reddish-brown hair, of which the tint was unmis-

takably artificial. She resembled one of Rossetti's models. The younger lady was slender also, and the poise of her neck was very graceful. She stood with her head lowered and her face turned to the fire. She was not speaking, but seemed listening in a preoccupied manner to a triangular conversation between Lady Romer, as the Rossetti lady was called, another pretty girl, and a sandy-haired, distinguished-looking man.

Lady Romer turned and addressed her host ; but her large eyes wandered in the direction of a bountiful-looking matron—placid, upright, decorous, whose smooth hair was drawn straight down from her forehead, and who wore black velvet and the family diamonds. This lady, the very type of a well-conditioned British squiress, was evidently studying the fashionable beauty with curiosity and disapproval. Lady Romer talked slowly, in a

sweetly modulated voice, with an appearance of extreme candour and some pretty gesticulation.

‘Colonel Rainshaw,’ said she with innocent audacity, ‘Miss Geneste and Mr. Margrave are trying to persuade me that I looked better when my hair was black. What is your opinion? I don’t know whether you have a good eye for colouring, or perhaps you are one of those people who think Nature can never make a mistake.’

‘I am liberal all round in my views, Lady Romer, and don’t conform to the dogma of infallibility either in the case of Nature or the Pope,’ said Rainshaw diplomatically, with a comprehensive bow, and a series of greetings to various guests who were not staying in the house. ‘The standard of beauty must always be regulated by a charming woman’s taste.’

‘Or that of a man to be charmed,’ mur-

mured Lady Romer with a little shrug of her shoulders. 'That's so nice of you,' she added aloud; 'but you take care not to commit yourself. You have not the courage of your opinions, Colonel Rainshaw. Now I am unfashionable enough to be loyal to my old faiths and my old friends. Six months ago Esmé Colquhoun's verdict would have been generally satisfactory.'

'Ichabod! how are the mighty fallen!' said the sandy-haired gentleman.

'Oh!' said Lady Romer plaintively, 'it's all the jealousy of those horrid newspaper editors. They can't bear us to get rich except by inheritance. If *I* were to try and increase my income by taking shares in a dressmaking company, there would be a satirical article in one of the weeklies, called "Bombast and Bombazine," or something equally ridiculous. Poor Esmé! I sent him "Sonnets and Sawdust" to

America ; I thought it would amuse him. I can't see why he should be laughed at because his stock of timber caught fire—or what the burning of the Champion Road saw-mills—by the way, where is Champion Road ? ’

‘ Follow Buckingham Palace Road to its bitter end, Lady Romer, and in due time you'll reach Champion Road and the site of Colquhoun's saw-mills,’ replied Rainshaw.

‘ I don't see how the Champion Road saw-mills can affect the abstract question of what is beautiful and what is not. Isn't it the highest art to idealise nature? Well, I'm nature idealised. Therefore—— That's a syllogism or something like it, Miss Fountain. I know you are nothing if you are not philosophical.’

‘ Oh, yes ! Judith is a great deal besides being philosophical,’ said the pretty girl, who had a remarkably vivid face. She was half

foreign, and was noted in the little set to which she belonged for her clever impersonations of well-known people. She gave one now, which, however, was lost upon Major Graysett as far as its application went, though he listened eagerly. 'I have heard Esmé Colquhoun say'—she put her head back slightly and rolled out her words in a liquid loose way, with a good deal of emphasis and expression—'“ Miss Fountain is complex ; she is a harmony of contradictions ; she is everything but crude.” And then he added with a sigh, as though it were an after-thought : “ Nature is crude.” One felt so sorry for poor Nature.'

Everyone laughed except the girl with her face to the fire.

'That's exactly what I'm trying to prove,' said Lady Romer ; 'but you will find it all exhaustively explained in Mr. Colquhoun's new

book. I've read parts of it in manuscript. It is to be published anonymously in America and judiciously puffed here. Everybody will rush to the libraries, and admire it on the strength of its being American. Then the critics and the public will discover that their Transatlantic star is Esmé Colquhoun, the despised prophet.'

'A phoenix rising from the ashes of the saw-mills,' said Mr. Margrave. 'It was stupid of Colquhoun to try and combine trade, fashion, and poetry. He didn't show his usual cleverness there. What should a young fellow, who has been educated at Eton and Oxford, who writes impassioned sonnets, and proclaims himself the Apostle of the Beautiful, know about sawing wood? It isn't in reason. For instance, if your husband, Lady Romer, bought up Marshall and Snelgrove; how should he know when bombazine was riz?

You'd expect a smash up, and a laugh at your expense.'

The door opened. Miss Cromlin was announced. There was a little flutter and a good deal of apologising on the part of the late arrival.

'Lady Romer, allow me,' said Colonel Rainshaw offering his arm. 'And, Graysett—Miss Fountain, let me introduce Major Graysett.'

There was a general movement and dispersion. The young lady by the fireplace turned and bowed. Graysett came forward and also bowed. Their eyes met. Involuntarily he recoiled a step. He turned very pale, and stared at her for a few seconds with a kind of wild wonder. She observed his emotion, and her eyes dilated with surprise; but outwardly she was perfectly composed.

There was nothing startling in her appearance except a sort of spirituality, which was

perhaps her chief attraction. Her features were delicately cut. Her hair—golden-brown, with ruddy shades here and there—was not cut and curled about her brow, but fell back in natural waves from her half-oval forehead. She had singularly lucid eyes, and rather thin, melancholy lips. Her smile was distant but engaging. Her air, though rather dreamy, seemed that of a woman accustomed to society, and her white dress had no affectation of peculiarity, and was perfect in all its details. Graysett beheld in her the woman of his vision.

The recognition was instant and convincing. There was no possibility of doubt, even making allowance for an overwrought imagination. Though in his vision the face had worn an expression of tragic horror and appeal, every feature was identical with the countenance before him ; and the great gray eyes, that now returned his gaze, had in them something of

the same pathos and unearthliness as those other eyes which had mutely entreated him.

He gave her his arm, and they moved on; but he was too stupefied to utter any of the tentative remarks which pave the way for more intimate conversation at the dinner-table. They filed in the procession across the hall almost in silence; and it was not till the soup plates had been removed that, roused by a reproachful glance from his host, Graysett rather abruptly turned to address Miss Fountain, and found that she had bent slightly towards him, evidently with the same intention.

‘You have come from Scotland to-day, have you not?’ said she.

He answered vaguely, with the usual reference to the weather. ‘I left it snowing heavily up North. You seem to have been more fortunate. But it was an odd sort of evening. I

thought it very weird—the sprinkling of snow, the moonlight and everything—when I arrived.’

‘ You got here late. I think I understood from Mrs. Rainshaw that you are an old brother officer of her husband’s, and that you have not been long in England.’ She began to play with the illuminated card upon which her name was inscribed, and added, ‘ Don’t you think that it would be useful if a short biography of the person were written here under the name, for one’s guidance in conversation—at all events at a London dinner party? ’

‘ I suppose it would. But some people like giving play to the imagination. One can always conjecture a good deal.’

‘ Well, there’s some amusement in verifying one’s conjectures,’ said she languidly. ‘ But, to take an interest in making frames for your fellow-creatures, you ought to be very fresh

and sympathetic. I think that I like best to find the frames ready made.'

Graysett hazarded the remark that a good many portraits were hardly worth framing.

'I agree with you,' said Miss Fountain. 'In a county collection, for instance, there would be several duplicates. But I must say this for London: you get more types there, and occasionally you can plunge straight into deep water without taking soundings. I'm rather confused in my metaphors,' she added, with her soft smile; and then it struck him that there was a suggestion of cynicism about her mouth.

'At all events,' he answered, 'you appear in my case to have taken a few soundings—suppose, if I'm worth it, that you plunge straight into deep water.'

'I might strike against a rock. And I'm not sure that you have not an advantage over me. I fancied, when you were introduced to

me, that you thought we had met before. I don't remember it, however.'

Graysett evaded the implied question.

'You were playing, I think, when I arrived—a waltz, was it not?—very pretty and melancholy. And Rainshaw, when I remarked this of the air, told me a curious thing. He said you composed it in your sleep. Is that true?'

Miss Fountain hesitated a moment, and then replied, 'Not strictly so. I did not compose the waltz. I heard it in a dream. The air seemed unknown to me; but possibly I had heard it before.'

'A dream which left a very vivid impression on your mind?' asked Graysett eagerly.

'No,' she answered, 'not particularly vivid. It was the impression of a very pleasant waltz, with a partner whose step suited mine, but who in all other respects was vague. The dream has been realised,' she added laughing.

‘ People have got hold of the waltz through hearing me play it, and I’ve danced to it several times.’

There was a little interlude, during which Major Graysett tested the capacity of his friends’ cook, and Miss Fountain, after toying with a morsel of sole, pensively observed the decorations of the table. Presently Graysett said suddenly—

‘ Are you a great friend of the gentleman whom they were talking about in the drawing-room just now—Mr. Esmé Colquhoun ? ’

Judith turned her head swiftly, and looked inquiringly at her companion. ‘ I have met Mr. Colquhoun very often in London.’

‘ You know him, then, intimately ? ’

Judith smiled in a manner which made him feel that he had put his question more persistently than was becoming.

‘ Of course,’ added Graysett, ‘ intimacy doesn’t imply friendship.’

‘Aren’t you adopting your own suggestion,’ said she, ‘and plunging straight into deep waters?’

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said. ‘I thought we had tacitly agreed to skip the preliminary process. We might try the experiment, for one evening.’

‘I should not wonder if we made some curious discoveries?’ she replied; ‘I agree. And now there’s the ocean before us. You have not made a very bold excursion, though; it’s rather the fashion to talk of Mr. Esmé Colquhoun. We are not friends,’ she added with an appearance of candour. ‘He is only interested in people who cause him an emotion. I don’t. I do not affect him in any way.’

‘Your opinion does not seem to reconcile itself with his criticism of you.’

‘Oh! if that remark had been a little more clever, I should say that he wanted a peg upon

which to hang an epigram. The fact is, that he has studied me only in the most superficial way, and has probably talked more *of* me than *to* me. I am outside the circle of his sensibilities.'

'The circle must be a narrow one.'

'On the contrary it is immense. Now I am going to say a spiteful thing. Mr. Colquhoun lives two lives: one is spent in cheating the world, the other in cheating himself. Do you suspect me of finding fault with grapes which are too high over my head? He has never immortalised my hair in a sonnet; and he has written dozens to that of—a great many other ladies.'

'I am rather inclined to suspect you of a sarcasm, which I am too ignorant of the subject to appreciate.'

'You know Mr. Colquhoun, don't you?' she asked in a matter of fact way.

'No. It is only a few weeks since I came

home from India. I don't remember ever having heard his name mentioned before this evening.'

'Yet it appears to interest you very much. That seems strange, since you are not acquainted with Mr. Colquhoun even by reputation.'

'Has he a great reputation?'

'I suppose so—in the literary and artistic worlds.'

'Ah! to those I am a stranger. But I daresay that at times some name, casually spoken, has struck a chord in your imagination, and you have felt a strange presentiment that you would shortly meet the owner. That was my case, and the reason of my questions.'

'I have had presentiments,' said Miss Fountain gravely; 'some strange ones. Yours does not strike me as being very extraordinary,' she added. 'Several people here are friends of

Esmé Colquhoun, and sooner or later you will meet him in their company.'

There was another brief interlude, and Graysett became aware that Miss Fountain was examining him attentively.

'I fancy that you have a leaning towards occult subjects,' said she. 'Isn't it so?'

'What makes you think so?' he asked, without directly answering her question.

'Sympathy perhaps,' she said with a little laugh, which he thought very charming. 'See'—she held her hand, with the back upwards and the fingers extended, before him for a second. He saw that it was very long and more tapering than is usual, the point of the third stretching considerably beyond that of the index finger. 'I have the hand of a mystic, so have you. That's a sign of freemasonry between us.'

'I am glad of that fact at any rate,' said

Graysett, 'though I must confess that any mystic tendency which I possess is in an early stage of development. In what way does yours show itself?'

'I have intuitions. Seers say that I am clairvoyant. They tell me that I have psychic power. I am bound to believe them, though in honesty I too must acknowledge that no one has succeeded in testing my power.'

'How have people set about attempting it?' asked Graysett, not quite sure how far she was in earnest.

'Oh, no one in a really serious way. Lady Romer and one or two of her friends have tried to mesmerise me, but, although these persons have assured me that I am an admirable subject, they have never been able to do anything with me.'

'Is Lady Romer occult? That is the word, is it not? I should not have imagined it.'

‘She dabbles in everything that is mysterious and exciting. They—the seers—say that she has strong physical magnetism ; certainly she contrives to make people do very foolish things.’

‘I wish you would tell me who “they” are to whose authority you refer so mysteriously,’ said Graysett.

Judith waited a moment before answering. ‘I don’t think you are likely to meet them. They don’t court notoriety. “They” is a little set of wonderful people who have come—some say from India, some, from America. I really don’t know. They see—what we cannot see. They have a curious religion of their own, and are under the orders, of a mysterious Brotherhood. They have strange clear eyes and a downright way of talking—as though they could not be contented without absolutely getting at your soul, and judging you by the

sort of stuff it was made of. It was they who told me that I had psychic force. I wanted to join them—to be taught how to exercise it. But they would have nothing to do with me. In fact they solemnly warned me against laying myself open to influences from the spiritual world.'

'You listened to and obeyed the warning, I suppose.'

'No. My curiosity was rampant. You'll think it strange that I should be at once a materialist and a spiritualist, but it is so. I can't believe in arbitrary agencies of that kind, nor can I get up any becoming awe of the supernatural. I am convinced that everything which happens in that world is a question of cause and effect, just as it is here. We are not afraid of material things because we can reason about them. If we knew and could reason about what they call supernatural things, we

should not be afraid either. I immediately joined Lady Romer's *séances*; but it was no use. I am not cosmic enough for that sort of magnetism to affect me.'

At any other time her odd talk and the curious expressions she used, which were uttered without affectation, would have amused Graysett, and he might have analysed with considerable zest this, to him, new specimen of the occult young lady. But the hold she took upon him was too serious for the play of humorous fancy. He was groping his way among mysteries, and all that she said deepened the impression of glamour and unreality which had been steadily creeping over him, making speech and action seem for the moment automatic.

'I wonder what sort of magnetism would affect you,' he said, falling into her vein.

'I don't know.'

She leaned forward as if meditating. It was quite curious to remark what a change had been wrought in her by the fascination of a subject which evidently engrossed her mind. Her eyes had the bright flash which indicates enthusiasm, and her manner had lost its little touch of artificiality and flavouring of smartness. Graysett felt sure she was not now thinking of him as a person, and that she had lost any curiosity she might have had at first as to how she should impress him.

‘I don’t know,’ she repeated. ‘It would be something not quite spiritual and not quite physical, but both. I’m not to be approached directly from either side. In fact I begin to fancy that I’m neither fish nor fowl nor honest red herring. At any rate I couldn’t be swayed by the power which works miracles on platforms. I only know one person who I think might open the door for me. And I’m

not sure whether it would be wise to trust him. It's an intuition only. I have a curiosity, however, to test his power.'

'That might be a dangerous experiment,' said Graysett, in the leisurely way with which people commence an anecdote and an *entrée* at the same time. 'I'll tell you why I think so. You were talking of mesmerism, which seems to be the recognised high road to that undiscovered country.'

CHAPTER IV.

‘I DON’T suppose it’s the only one,’ said Miss Fountain, ‘though it seems the easiest. But tell me why you think the experiment might be dangerous. Were you generalising, or—you could not guess to whom I referred then?’

There was something childlike in her frank curiosity, which contrasted almost grimly with the tragic suggestions that crowded Graysett’s imagination.

‘You do not know anything about me?’

He looked at her sadly. ‘I wish that I did,’ he said, with an odd kind of earnestness. ‘I wish you’d tell me whom you meant.’

She laughed softly and shook her head.

‘Go on,’ said she, ‘this is a very interesting conversation; ‘but I am afraid that I prevent you from eating your dinner. Still, time is long at a dinner party. There’s a good deal before you. Tell me what *you* meant.’

‘Oh, it is nothing in reality,’ said he; ‘an intuition on my part. Only this. I once went to an exhibition of the sort in India. A woman was the biologist. She was a great, coarse, muscular creature. I shouldn’t have fancied that there was much of the spiritual about her. I suppose it was what you call physical magnetism. She brought people up from the amphitheatre to the platform by a look, as it appeared, and when she had them there, her command over their bodies and souls seemed complete. At one minute they were yelping and barking round her like so many cats and dogs, into which she had in imagination transformed them. At another they were stretched, a

dozen rigid corpses, on the stage. In a second, at the order 'Each one to his trade,' they were up and doing, all in a fever of excitement—climbing imaginary masts, shoeing imaginary horses, hammering, weaving, plaiting straw, digging, gesticulating, and cutting the most absurd capers. This was the ludicrous side of it. There was a tragic one as well. A poor boy, very slight and delicate, with strange dreamy eyes, who had shown a strong repugnance to mounting the platform, was made by his employer to go up. She was a long time operating upon him, and seemed very much exhausted by her efforts. She succeeded at last, however, in getting him off; but—he never came to again. You have eyes like that boy.'

Judith gave a little shudder. 'Poor boy!' she murmured softly. 'Well,' she said, after a few moments, 'lest my death should lie upon anyone's conscience, I depute you to bear

witness that I have been duly warned, and have encountered the risk of my own free will. There's something wonderfully fascinating in the idea of that "undiscovered country." I have an intense desire to explore it ; I should like to pass the barrier to-night.'

'Better keep on this side of the fence,' said Graysett earnestly. 'There is safety where no mystery lurks.'

'Ah !' she exclaimed, 'don't you feel, as I do, that everything is a mystery? What can be a greater mystery than dreaming, for instance? Isn't thought a mystery? Isn't memory a mystery?'

Judith's voice, though low, was penetrating, and rose clearly in a sudden lull which had fallen upon that corner of the table. The foreign girl with the vivacious face, who was sitting next Graysett, laughed and bent forward to attract his attention.

‘This, at least, is no mystery,’ said she touching the menu—‘*Cailles à la royale*. Major Graysett, when you are out of cloud-land you’ll find them at your elbow. They’ve been there for some time.’

Graysett apologised and mechanically helped himself, while he addressed some trite remark to Miss Geneste. But presently the buzz of the dinner-table increased, and he again turned to Judith Fountain, who took up the conversation at the point where it had dropped.

‘Sympathies, affinities, and antipathies are mysteries—the most interesting of all,’ said she. ‘I am sure there are certain laws which govern all those things. Think of the strange way in which people affect you—no two alike ; well, there must be some current, force—I don’t know what to call it—in people, which when they are brought together operates according to the given conditions. It’s a kind of spiri-

tual chemistry, and we are like the contents of a test tub.' She laughed again in her soft fashion. 'Don't you know there are liquids which won't combine unless a connecting medium is introduced into the tub? I think that must be the case with human beings sometimes.'

'How do you mean?' he asked in a startled manner.

'Why, imagine two persons who might influence each other in the most powerful way, held apart by a spiritual antagonism! A third person appears, and some element in him or her forms the connecting link between the other two. There's a great deal in my idea, if it were worked out scientifically. And how glorious to have the knowledge which would enable one to direct the hidden forces in one's own and in other people's natures!'

‘One might be burned as a witch or a wizard. That would not be glorious,’ answered Graysett.

‘You forget,’ said she smiling, ‘what Mrs. Rainshaw is always trying to impress upon us : that we live in the nineteenth century, and that the mistakes of all previous centuries are so much clear profit to us.’

Graysett laughed, not so much at her remark, as at his own thoughts.

‘I know what is passing through your mind,’ said she. ‘Somebody—Colonel Rainshaw probably—has told you that I am stupid, and it occurs to you that I am perhaps less stupid than is supposed.’

‘It appears,’ said Graysett, ‘that you give occasion for controversy.’

‘I see,’ she answered, ‘my intuition was a correct one. I am getting into dangerous waters, however; and perhaps we have been

long enough off the conventional track. Shall we talk about something commonplace, and plunge into every-day life again ? ’

‘ I beseech you no. I feel in a mist of strange impressions. Anything might happen to me—except the commonplace. This is dreamland.’

‘ A comfortable substantial dreamland,’ said she, glancing down the table. ‘ And the figures opposite us look particularly solid. Am I the only phantom in your dream ? ’

‘ That may be the case in a more literal sense than you imagine,’ answered Graysett in a serious manner.

She looked at him wonderingly, but did not reply ; and there was a pause, during which Graysett’s champagne glass was emptied and refilled. The stimulant seemed to him a necessity, and braced his nerves. He was conscious of talking with more animation than was his

wont, when an appeal from Miss Geneste drew him into a discussion upon Buddhist philosophy which, *à propos* of a criticism upon 'Mr. Isaacs,' had been started upon his other side. There is nothing more illustrative of the medley of life than the froth of truth and falsity, earnestness and flippancy, comedy and tragedy, which may be skimmed from the conversation at a dinner party.

Mr. Margrave, sitting opposite, had apparently alighted upon a barren pasture in the shape of his companion—the spinster who had kept everybody waiting. He was eyeing the others affectionately across the table, and had pushed up his flaxen imperial as if ready to contribute his opinions to the mass generally. He rather affected transcendental speculation, though he professed a cynical contempt for the supernatural; and he had a dry, colourless way of expressing himself, that suggested a

reserve of something worth hearing, which however never came to the fore.

‘What interests me in that line of thought,’ he said, ‘is that at any rate it argues from analogy. Granting that there is such a thing as spirit at all, if you admit the physical evolution of the species you may logically infer the evolution of the soul also. And since every seven years one is supposed to change the tissues of one’s body, may it not be conjectured that the “soul stuff” changes likewise? Twenty years ago I believed in a God. My idea of Him was of an old man with a long gray beard and a very large eye, who was always on the lookout to punish me for what I particularly liked doing—always, so to speak, watching round corners. Well, that has passed. My soul is now, as I am well aware, on intimate terms with my digestion, and has no fear of the conventional deity whatsoever. Can anyone

tell me if this soul is the one I possessed twenty years ago?’

Mr. Margrave looked round with the air of one propounding a conundrum, and then helped himself to an olive.

‘H’sh,’ murmured Mrs. Rainshaw, darting daggers at him, her consciousness of the presence of a neighbouring rector overcoming her sense of the humorous, which as a rule was very easily titillated.

Mr. Margrave asked innocently, ‘Does anybody know Micky Frere?’ But his attempt at a diversion fell somewhat flat, for the rector had perpetrated a ponderous joke, at which all who heard it thought it their duty to laugh.

‘Micky Frere generally says what he thinks,’ pursued Mr. Margrave reflectively, taking another olive. ‘When I ingenuously stated that I liked visiting my friends in the hunting season, he remarked, “My dear

fellow, you are five years older than I am, and you go to stay in a country house, where you can't get what you want to eat, and you can't grumble when you are put upon!" There's something in it.'

All the time this banal talk was proceeding, and even while with his voice he joined in it, Graysett's mind was occupied with Miss Fountain, and her fanciful suggestions which chimed so curiously with his own mood. He could hardly keep from looking at her, though at the moment he might be conversing with others. Every movement she made and every passing expression upon her countenance, roused him to almost painful interest. The fascination she exercised over him was of a weird kind, and seemed quite independent of her personal attractions. He had hardly considered the question of her beauty, and when gazing into her eyes he had not been conscious of admir-

ing them. He could not criticise her from any ordinary standpoint. His feeling for her was too subtle to be analysed. It was as though he had met her upon another plane than that of social intercourse, and that in this rarefied atmosphere conventional limitations could not be observed, so that a glance, a smile, a word, seemed commensurable with hours, days, even weeks of intimacy. It struck him that she also might be possessed with the same fancy, and might be sensible of being acted upon by one of those mysterious forces to which she had half-jestingly alluded. While he was thus thinking, she turned suddenly upon him.

‘Tell me,’ she said, ‘why did you look so taken by surprise—or was it by horror? I could almost have fancied so—when Colonel Rainshaw introduced you to me. Had you been dreaming of me?’

‘I’ll tell you the truth,’ he answered impulsively. ‘Your guess is a correct one. I had seen your face in a dream not long before I saw it in reality.’

‘Oh, this is very interesting, this is very curious!’ she exclaimed, in a low tone, her eyes dilating, and her whole face lighting up. ‘Perhaps you can help me. Did anything of the sort ever happen to you before? Perhaps you are a seer?’

‘I am a most distinctly prosaic person, Miss Fountain, and I know nothing of the subjects you are interested in. I am not sure whether I should have treated them with proper reverence a little while ago; but I confess that I feel now less inclined to scepticism.’

‘And did you never have an experience of this kind before?’ she asked again, looking disappointed.

‘Never in my life.’

‘ Yet you look—I feel almost certain—’ she began thoughtfully ; then added, ‘ Here is an illustration of my theory of spiritual chemistry. You have come under the influence of my magnetism, and I have developed in you some latent occult faculty. May I not hear your dream ? ’

‘ Not now. And see, in a few moments you will be leaving the dining-room. ’

‘ You will tell it to me later ? ’

‘ I don’t know. I am not sure, ’ said Graysett confusedly. ‘ I wish you would let me make a bargain with you, and that you would exchange secrets. I wish you would tell me who the person is, that you fancy might magnetise you. Then I will tell you my dream. ’

Miss Fountain’s expression altered for the moment. Her smile had a suggestion of haughtiness, and she replied with dignity,

‘I have no secrets in relation to these matters which I would hesitate in telling to anyone who looked upon them in the abstract light that I myself do. Certainly I agree to your bargain. We will talk about it by-and-by.’

She rose as she spoke in obedience to Mrs. Rainshaw’s signal, and the ladies trooped from the room.

A little later, they were scattered in knots about the drawing-room. Lady Romer, Miss Geneste, and one or two others of the more fashionable sat together ; Mrs. Rainshaw heroically entertaining two county matrons, whose conversation was not exhilarating. Judith Fountain sate somewhat apart ; and between the two first groups, though belonging to neither, was a little round-faced lady—she who had been allotted to Mr. Margrave—with a small *retroussé* nose, and fair hair rolling in large waves over her forehead. She had very

round blue eyes, and a surprised, innocent sort of look, and a little pucker about her lips as though she were only just realising the fact that she had passed her first youth, and had not yet adjusted herself to altered conditions. She listened with great attention to Lady Romer's lively cackle, and evidently considered herself qualified by experience to join in the discussion of London frivolities.

‘The world is very bad ; yes, indeed,’ she was saying in her small voice. ‘But don’t you think it is getting better? Now I have a friend in London with two daughters, and they belong to a society. It’s called “The Society for Moral and Social Reform among the Upper Classes.” Oh, nothing to do with the poor ! I assure you it’s quite beautiful to hear them talk of Humanity,’ added the surprised-looking lady, unconsciously emphasising the capital H, ‘and the Aspirations of Women,

and the Final End of the Race. And then the work they do is quite prodigious.'

'Well, tell us, Miss Cromlin, how they set about reforming the Upper Classes,' said Mrs. Rainshaw, welcoming the prospect of a diversion; 'though I don't think that I should support the movement, for I always think the wicked people are the most amusing. I wish we had a few more wicked people down about these parts. At least—I mean—I wish hunting wasn't looked upon as a sacred duty, or that Tom didn't think it my sacred duty to stay at home and mind the baby. Tell us what these Reformers do.'

'They have meetings, dear Mrs. Rainshaw; I can't quite say what they talk about, for I was never admitted to one. The fact is, they always said I hadn't realised the greatness of the sphere, which I am sure was not the case, for the more I see of life, the more I'm struck

with the bigness of it. It's quite bewildering I'm sure. Then they write things and have a secretary, and they go into society a good deal in order to improve its tone. Oh, they went out a great deal, and people might have thought they were frivolous; but they always said that their object was to elevate the tone of fashionable parties, and that from any other point of view London life was utterly vapid and unsustaining. Do you find it so?' innocently added Miss Cromlin, turning to Lady Romer.

'London vapid!' cried the latter. '“The pulse of the world; the mirror of life,” to quote Esmé Colquhoun. Why, if you want intellectual food, you have only to stand still like the Israelites at Sinai, and manna will drop into your mouth.'

Judith Fountain, who had been listlessly turning over the leaves of a 'Punch,' and

whose eyes were in dreamland, rose abruptly, and stood irresolute, as though debating how to occupy herself.

‘Sing something, Judith,’ said Mrs. Rainshaw.

‘My throat is relaxed, dear, and I have a headache.’

Then there was a stir among the dowagers, for this raised a point upon which each had a right to be heard.

‘Salt and water,’ suggested Miss Cromlin, sweetly.

‘Sal volatile,’ spoke a meek-looking clergyman’s wife.

‘There’s nothing like strong coffee,’ said a cheery-faced woman, who rode after the hounds. And Miss Fountain remarked languidly that the best cure for a headache was to let it wear itself out.

‘That depends upon the kind, my dear,’

observed the stout, decorous matron, whose diamonds were to be envied. 'If it is neuralgic, let me recommend three bella donna pilules—we are homœopaths, you know; but for a bilious headache, nox vomica, &c.'

Judith sat down desperately to the piano. She played very prettily, in a fitful manner, but at times with crisp precision, and occasionally a passionate intonation that lent contrast to her fugitive style. It was a Bohemian dance which she sent ringing through the room, a wild fantastic thing of which each phrase suggested a fresh movement and a fresh emotion—now coy and inviting, now reluctant, now crashing and dashing in a phase of mad excitement, anon plaintive and reproachful, and again in stately minuet time, evoking visions of our powdered grandmothers, and of the ballet in 'Don Giovanni.' She was still playing when the gentlemen entered the draw-

ing-room. Her head was bent slightly forward, her gray eyes shining and darkened, her lissom form curved. Graysett noticed, for the first time, the fine moulding of her shape, her cameo-like profile, and the dark masses of hair which crowned her head. There is no charm in a woman more subtle or suggestive than the back view of a well-poised neck, from the nape of which the hair grows upward in luxuriant waves, and which curves inward and downward and melts into the soft contour of throat and shoulder. It was to be noticed that Judith Fountain's claims to admiration lay rather in those rare indefinable charms than in any robust and striking beauty of feature, form, or colouring. To be strongly attracted by this girl seemed to imply the possession of a sense not commonly developed among men. She appealed not to the herd : some electric current must be estab-

lished, some chord struck, before her influence could be felt. When once felt, it quickly became irresistible. She was then more than interesting, she was absorbing. This Graysett instinctively realised as he watched her.

By the same intuitive eye he perceived that, notwithstanding her undoubted individuality, she was extremely susceptible to impressions from her companions or surroundings. He now partially understood why Rainshaw had called her stupid, and could conceive of conditions under which her brightness would be completely dimmed, and her responsiveness to a congenial companion become stolid indifference when the topic mooted was not in accordance with her own bent. While playing she seemed to breathe an atmosphere which her music had created, and for the time to have forgotten her surroundings. When, however, she left the piano and dropped into the

circle of country neighbours which Rainshaw had now joined, [he observed that the very expression of her face changed. All brilliance vanished from her eyes and smile, she looked dazed and preoccupied, and appeared either to have lost the faculty of conversation or not to care about exercising it.

Presently a striking-looking woman, with short golden hair, fine blue eyes set wide apart, a clear creamy skin, and that sensitive nose curving slightly upward at the point which is supposed to indicate dramatic genius, took Judith's place and sang a little Venetian boat song, with the most charming air possible. She was dressed in dull-red velvet, with a high collar and ruffles of old lace. She had a full beautiful throat and neck like ivory, quite unadorned, and her whole appearance was what is generally termed artistic. There was something delightfully fresh and Bohemian in her

voice and air ; but it was evident that she had all the *savoir faire* of a woman of the world. When she had finished her song she sat still, one arm resting upon the music-desk, the lace falling back and thus leaving its shapely outlines disclosed—it was a very beautiful arm and in its way eloquent. With the other hand she picked out little suggestive passages of different melodies which seemed a sort of running accompaniment to her talk. That too was picturesque and vivacious. A small group was gathered round her. She had created a little movement, and, as it were unconsciously, had broken up the stiff knots into which people had formed themselves.

‘ Venice ! ’ she was saying ; ‘ I have just come back. I went there to paint my “ Consuelo ; ” that is my ideal city. The charm of old-world associations is in the very atmosphere ; but it is exhilarating, not

oppressive. You are not weighed down by a sense of your deficiencies and by the gloom and grandeur of the past as in Rome. In Rome you must know the history of every stone and you must study every master-piece ; but in Venice you breathe history and art unconsciously ; and to live is to be happy.'

CHAPTER V.

‘WHO is that lady?’ asked Graysett, glad of the opportunity to address Miss Fountain.

‘Don’t you know?’ she answered. ‘That is Christine Borlase, the painter.’

‘I am an outer barbarian. But candid confession brings its advantages. You sum up characters so epigrammatically. I wish you would describe—Miss or Mrs. Borlase?’

‘Mr. Borlase is the British Consul at—somewhere in Asia Minor. Mrs. Borlase goes out to him for a month in the winter, and he comes to London for a month in the summer. It is a very good arrangement when people’s tastes clash ; don’t you think so? Mr. Borlase

had delicate lungs, which, however, don't seem to prevent him from collecting and deciphering hieroglyphic stones, and otherwise amusing himself after his peculiar fashion. He is an Oriental scholar—an antiquary. Both in manners and climate the East suits him better than England. He dislikes London society. In fact, Mr. Borlase is not artistic—in our sense of the word.'

'I see. The term "artistic" implies a great deal in modern life.'

Judith laughed. 'And, like charity, covers a multitude of sins. Not, however, in the case of Mrs. Borlase. She is perfect. She has no sins. But, apart from particulars, I prefer artistic to Philistine society, and so will you, if you have not already made your choice.'

'Please go on describing the lady in question. I would not for the world miss a word of the biography.'

‘You must go to Miss Geneste for biographies. I am not generally suspected of being brilliant. Mrs. Borlase speaks for herself. She is a child, an artist, and a woman of the world all in one. She is equally devoted to friendship, amusement, and work. She is very spontaneous. She is so frank that no one could for a moment imagine her designing. Her studio is delightful, and her Thursday evenings more popular than any in London. Ill-natured persons say that is because cigarettes are allowed. It is there that you will meet Mr. Esmé Colquhoun, whom we both seem to have got on the brain this evening.’

She moved as she spoke towards an archway, heavily draped with Oriental stuff, which led into a dimly lighted window recess. Here were some low divans and lounging chairs. Into one of these she sank.

‘I am very tired,’ she said; ‘I feel as

though virtue had gone out of me. Now let me hear your dream.'

'First, if you have no objection, I will call upon you to fulfil your part of the bargain.'

'I have no objection,' she replied, after a moment's consideration; 'though it seems rather soon to begin making confidences about oneself. Yes, I'll tell you. I lay myself open, however, to a charge of inconsistency. But—it is a case of honour among thieves, isn't it, Major Graysett?' she asked, looking up at him suddenly as though to reassure herself. 'We have made a sort of convention—haven't we?—to take each other and life in general from the abstract point of view, and to get what entertainment we can out of that way of looking at things. I am very abstract myself. If I speculate about individuals, it is in an impersonal fashion. I criticise them as I would a picture. I could not condescend to petty

curiosity. But there are a good many people who would be interested in out of the way subjects, and yet who are not abstract—Lady Romer and Mrs. Borlase for example. Colonel Rainshaw may be put into another category.’

‘Oh, yes, I understand,’ said Graysett; ‘that all goes without saying. I hope that I have been trusted often enough to have learned that discretion, even in unimportant matters, is an accomplishment to be cultivated, and that a whispering gallery is best avoided whenever it is possible to do so.’

‘I am afraid that in such a case one would have to escape from civilisation altogether, and live in noble and primitive simplicity,’ said Judith. ‘You may be surprised to hear, after what I said at the beginning of dinner, that Mr. Esmé Colquhoun is the person who I think might seriously affect me, if our natures could ever be made to act upon each other.’

I don't fancy that is likely. The two *won't* be brought into contact. There's an innate antagonism—unless indeed you, Major Graysett, turn out to be the connecting medium.'

Graysett looked at her in a startled way, but did not answer. He seemed disturbed, and she became preoccupied for a moment.

'I talk flippantly, I know,' she said, with another little laugh, as was her way; then, as though impelled to frankness, she added, 'I think it is that I don't want to be serious about that feeling—that intuition I had when I first met Mr. Colquhoun.'

'Do you mind telling me how you felt?' said Graysett. 'Please don't think that I ask from petty curiosity.'

Judith's eyes took back their far-away expression, and her voice changed.

'Oh, no, we are serious inquirers. I don't think that we frivolous, excitable, modern

people are so very different from the Athenians, who spent their time in hearing and telling of some new thing. It was spiritualism and the planchette till that got vulgar. One day it is mesmerism and will-power; another, thought-reading; and now India and America have set the fashion to a school of occultists.'

Graysett smiled.

'You have no sympathy with that phase of Indian life?' she inquired.

'It hasn't come in my way. But—I asked if you would describe your feeling with regard to Mr. Colquhoun.'

She shook her head decidedly. 'No, I had rather not at present. Perhaps I may by-and-by. I have fulfilled my promise to the letter. Now let me hear your story.'

Graysett narrated his dream in almost the same words as those in which he had told it to Rainshaw. Miss Fountain listened very atten-

tively. When he reached the point at which the stranger entered his room, and described the appearance of his unknown visitor, she uttered a low, eager cry of interest, but made no comment till the tale was ended. Then she said—

‘You recognised in me the woman of your vision? Don’t you think that in reality the face might not have been so clearly defined, and that your excited imagination may have caused you to fancy that it resembled mine? You saw me very soon afterwards—and people say that there is something rather dream-like about me.’

‘Impossible,’ said Graysett. ‘There was nothing indistinct about the vision-face. I wish that I had drawn it before I went into the drawing-room to meet the original. I would show it you. That would be a convincing proof.’

‘I don’t doubt you,’ she said thoughtfully.

‘It is only what a matter-of-fact person would say.’

‘It was *your* face,’ he continued. ‘I could have identified it with that of no one else.’

‘And the man?’ she asked. ‘In his case the impression was equally vivid. But you have not yet identified him.’

‘Rainshaw told me that I had exactly described Mr. Esmé Colquhoun. Now you see the connection of ideas. Does this also strike you?’

Miss Fountain did not reply. She looked troubled and at the same time excited.

‘Tell me what you think of it all,’ said he.

‘It is very strange! I should like to ask Madame Tamvaco.’

‘Who is Madame Tamvaco?’

‘One of those queer people I told you of. But she has gone away. I don’t know where. I had rather give no opinion,’ she added.

‘I daresay that you will meet Mr. Esmé Colquhoun before long, and then you will be able to judge for yourself. Thank you for the story. There is one very curious thing about it which I will point out to you.’

‘What is that?’

‘You have accurately described part of a house which belongs to me; and you are quite right, by the way, in saying that it is in bad taste. You would be confirmed in your opinion if you could see the outside—all stucco, and miniature turrets—a horrid suburban villa. I have only been once inside it, but no one could ever forget the odd contrast between the Japanese corridor and the Louis Quinze boudoir. I am surprised that you should have pictured it as inhabited by me. It is in a neighbourhood of London that I don’t like, and where I should not care to live. The uncle who left the place to me built

it, half after his own taste, half after that of his wife who was a French actress. Between them they certainly did not arrive at unity of style. Well, now you will admit that dreaming is a mystery.'

'If all this were a dream,' exclaimed Graysett, 'I must have gone to sleep and awakened in an incredibly short space of time.'

At that moment Mrs. Borlase advanced towards the recess, and an introduction ensued between the artist and Graysett. She seated herself beside Miss Fountain.

'Forgive me for interrupting you,' said she with her frank smile, which drew attention from the alert glance she sent from one to the other. 'You seem very much interested.'

'We were talking of my monstrosity of a villa,' said Judith composedly.

'Give me a commission, dear, and I'll engage to make it charming.'

‘You are clever enough to do even that,’ said Judith, ‘but as no one is going to live there it would not be worth while. Since I am forbidden either to sell or to let the house, I shall allow it to go quietly to ruin. Have you come to tell us that it is bed-time. I am quite ready.’

‘My message is that, the frumps having departed, all so disposed may adjourn to the billiard-room for cigarettes and pool. Judith,’ she added, holding forth a square sheet of thick note-paper inscribed in a peculiar handwriting, ‘you are not going to be like the rest of the world—are you?—and buffet a fallen giant. The evening’s post brought me this. Read it if you like. I want to enlist your sympathies. You know that Esmé and I are true art comrades and faithful friends; and that the license of friendship is allowed him.’

Graysett, whose capacity for observation

had been quickened, fancied that Mrs. Borlase's peculiarly melodious, rich-toned voice trembled. It occurred to him that, underneath that impulsive manner and candid exterior, unsuspected depths might lie. But the woman herself disarmed criticism. There was about her nothing snaky or feline. He felt drawn towards her rather than repelled. She seemed to him like a prisoner facing the world behind a screen of bars, with eyes that clearly said, 'It is a necessity that I should be still and bow to the authorities which are set up; but if I were free I would be a law to myself. I would never stoop to dissimulation.'

Judith took the letter and read :

'Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing? You are wise, noble, devoted. Your arguments are admirable. Your cold reasonableness is unwomanlike. For answer

I will refer you to a novel by Octave Feuillet, which doubtless you know already, and for the hero of which I have some sympathy and some contempt.

‘I have seen your “Consuelo.” It is strong and pure. It is a poem. You could have painted the picture nowhere but in Venice. I took with me to your studio one Vanstone, an American millionaire. He will buy the painting. But he has one or two crude suggestions to which, perhaps, as a sop to Mammon you had better attend. You were right, Christine. Rose wreaths often turn into fetters. You will have seen the reports of my reception. It is a curious experience to be lauded as an Apollo on one side of the Atlantic, to be denounced as Society’s last plaything, discarded and penniless, on the other. John Bull is a noble fellow, who never can resist kicking the fallen. An artist must

needs be the sport of knaves and fools. But the Balzac temperament has its privileges—the choicest that power which only such as he possess, of closing the door upon love, defeat, despair, and of passing as it were into another room. Life offers an endless variety of chambers, and in each sits the ideal woman, who will murmur with the tenderness of an angel, “Thou hast suffered much. Be comforted and forget.” And so I pass on.

‘I have engaged to see you concerning the “Consuelo.” How long do you remain with the Rainshaws, and what is your destination afterwards? I shall be at the Holmborough Hunt Ball; and De Burgh meets me the next day. Should you fail me there, I will ride over to Leesholm and claim a welcome from some of my old friends.

‘I am yours till then, and ever,

‘ESMÉ COLQUHOUN.’

Graysett observed again that Mrs. Borlase watched Judith closely while the girl read Colquhoun's letter. The two faces were a study. Repressed emotion was visible in both. It was a little drama below the surface to which he had no clue. He would have given much to know the thoughts of both women.

'Well?' asked Mrs. Borlase, as Judith handed her the letter.

'Thank you. It is characteristic. It is interesting; but I don't know why you should have supposed that it would especially interest me.'

'It does, does it not?'

'Yes,' replied Judith negligently. 'I always like to be truthful when there is no obvious reason for being otherwise. It interests me.'

'You will be kind to poor Esmé?'

'Why should I pity him?' said Judith.

‘He is not the only person in the world who has lost money or written one book below his level. There will be neither necessity nor opportunity for offering him my sympathy. Mr. Colquhoun never dances. He is not likely to break through his rule at the Holmborough Ball.’

‘Ah, but he is coming here. Colonel Rainshaw has promised to write to-night.’

‘That won’t make any difference,’ said Judith. ‘Mr. Colquhoun will be overwhelmed with offers of consolation.’

‘Consolation from you is rare enough to be a sovereign balm.’

‘It has only become so during the last six months, Christine,’ said Judith calmly.

Mrs. Borlase flushed. ‘Judith, you are hard. You are incomprehensible. You are a sphinx.’

‘No, dear,’ answered Judith. ‘I am only

stupid and indifferent; and prosperity has made me cynical. They are waiting for you in the billiard-room; and as I am very tired I will say good-night.'

When Graysett handed her a candle, she said to him, 'You must get my biography from Colonel Rainshaw, and then you will understand about the London house. But please do me a favour. Don't tell him that I am connected with your dream.'

'I had already decided not to mention the subject again to Rainshaw,' replied Graysett.

'That's right. Thank you. Good-night.'

Accordingly Graysett parried the attack which Colonel Rainshaw made upon him when they were alone by professing a far deeper interest in the Leesholm coverts than in psychological problems.

'At all events,' said Rainshaw lightly, 'you seemed to find Miss Fountain interesting,

to judge by the manner in which you devoted yourself to her; and I begin to think that she is a problem in her peculiar way. I watched her at dinner. She talked—and appeared to talk brilliantly. I have been told that she can say smart things upon provocation, but I am not the only person who fails to get anything out of her but the flattest and dreamiest remarks.'

'By the way,' said Graysett, 'she told me that I might ask you for her biography.'

Something in his voice seemed to rouse Rainshaw's attention. He looked at his friend as though considering an idea which had only now presented itself to his mind.

'Why was that, I wonder! Judith is considered a reserved person. She objects to being talked about, and is too indifferent to give any information about herself. Does she wish you to understand that her income is something over 7,000*l.* per annum, and that she

may be won by any daring fellow for the asking?’

‘I don’t think that is likely. She wouldn’t have to go far if she wanted a suitor.’

‘Do you feel disposed to become one? You admire her?’ asked Rainshaw.

‘Yes,’ assented Graysett; ‘at least she attracts me. I won’t answer your first question, for I have never thought about what it would involve.’

‘A man is usually supposed to be beginning to think about possible consequences, when, just after having been introduced to a marriageable girl, he talks to her straight off for several hours.’

‘In that case,’ said Graysett, ‘I should be certain of your approbation.’

‘No, I’m hanged if you would!’ exclaimed Rainshaw, eyeing him with a half-grave, half-comical expression. ‘I forbid the banns.’

‘That’s hardly necessary at present,’ said Graysett. ‘Notwithstanding your opinion, my dear Rainshaw, one doesn’t commence laying siege to an heiress at two hours’ notice.’

‘Doesn’t one? I did,’ replied Rainshaw frankly. ‘I made my plans at once. That’s half the battle. I know your state of mind exactly. You are feeling just as I felt when I came home. It arises from being out of sorts. Liver in my case—the same thing, complicated by jungle fever, in yours. Liver very often means love. You are dissatisfied with yourself. You take a loathing to steamboats, flirting married women, hill stations and clubs. You can’t help thinking how pleasant it would be to settle down comfortably in England with a nice income, good preserves, and a string of hunters. You like the notion of a well-dressed, sweet-tempered, fresh, candid-faced girl, whom you could honestly love, always about you—and

children and all the rest. It's respectable, clean, healthy, and altogether the proper thing. But I don't call Judith Fountain healthy or fresh. I should not like to see you married to her. I should expect that something uncanny would happen.'

'You don't reflect, my friend, that the type of woman which you admire so much might not suit me. I might prefer something more subtle. But tell me about Miss Fountain, for at present I am quite in the dark as to the cause of your objections.'

'Here is her biography. Judith is the daughter of one of the Fountains of Latchett, in Bedfordshire. Her father died some years ago, and his brother, the radical Fountain, who is member for Scratch Hill, gave her a home. Molly tells me that the poor girl had a rough time of it with Mrs. Fountain, who has the devil's own temper, and two plain

daughters to make her jealous of the pretty niece. They would have kept Judith in the background like a Cinderella, but Fountain interfered, and she has been going out with them for the last three or four seasons. She has not been a success, however, though people have admired her. There was always something odd about her, and at her best she looked like Ophelia in the mad scene, without the dressing up. The men with money haven't wanted to marry her, or she hasn't wanted to marry them, and has never got the credit of refusing a good offer. Or else Mrs. Fountain always put a spoke in the wheel. But now we have changed all that. Fortune makes great fools of people. Six months ago an uncle on the mother's side, whom no one had ever heard of, died, leaving Judith a quarter of a million in the Funds, and a brand-new mansion somewhere in the north of London. So the poor

Cinderella has now everything her own way ; and we all koo-too before her, and fight for the honour of introducing a husband to her notice. She receives these attentions with blank sweetness, and a spice of sardonic humour, which is the only thing in her with which I have any sympathy. It is just when I see this, that I am puzzled and inclined to recant. I feel sure that I am the only man intimate with her, who has the honesty to declare his conviction, that her apathy is not the cloak of talent, or a sign of moral superiority. It is a sign of weakness of intellect. Yes, believe me this is so. That strange interest in ghostly things—that unpleasant trick of staring into vacancy—her long fits of silence, and sudden flashes of liveliness, as to-night for instance—and a certain cunning which she has in divining people's thoughts and motives, are all accounted for by something wrong here.'

Rainshaw significantly touched his forehead.

Graysett looked horrified.

‘I see no sign of it,’ he said. ‘God forbid that this should be the case in one so young, and so attractive!’

‘I am afraid my supposition is not unreasonable, when one considers hereditary tendencies. I don’t think I’d risk it even for a quarter of a million in the Funds. Now don’t say that I haven’t warned you. I shouldn’t tell this to anyone but an old friend, for it is not fair to run down a girl and betray the secrets of her family. Still she sent you to me for her biography, and I am bound to give it without prejudice.’

‘I fancy that you have a dislike to poor Miss Fountain,’ said Graysett.

‘There’s no reason for it. I have every inducement to wish her well. She is a con-

nection of my wife's, and Molly is very fond of her, and anxious to see her happily married. But I must candidly confess that I have never taken to her. She is not to my taste. She comes of an unsound stock. She gives me the creeps. That reminds me, you'll have an opportunity shortly of comparing your dream-hero with the original. Christine Borlase and Lady Romer have insisted upon my inviting Colquhoun here after the Holmborough ball. Mark my words—trust a woman to stick to you when you are down, and to lend you a helping hand up. They mean to marry him to Judith Fountain.'

CHAPTER VI.

GRAYSETT had neither dream nor fateful vision that night ; but he lay awake for many hours, deeply occupied with Miss Fountain and the extraordinary change which had taken place in himself. He had always believed that his temperament was not one to be swayed by transcendental influences, or to yield readily to feminine attractions. A man of six-and-thirty, who in the course of many varied experiences has never seriously compromised himself in his relations with women, and whose emotions have been always more or less under the control of his judgment, has a right to consider himself hardened. It was a shock to him now

to find that his mind was completely engrossed by a girl whom he had met for the first time that evening. He had not looked upon himself as likely to fall in love, though Rainshaw had been right in conjecturing that the idea of marrying had already presented itself to him. In fact Rainshaw had drawn a prosaic but tolerably correct picture of the state of Graysett's feelings in regard to this question. Marriage seemed the natural and orthodox future for him to contemplate. He had perhaps deferred it too long, and had thus missed a sweetness which otherwise life might have given him ; but this he could not regret in the face of existing circumstances, and of the fact that, since the rupture of an early engagement, he had not seen any woman whom he would have cared to make his wife.

Though ready in action, ardent in sport, and keenly enjoying pleasure, he had been

indolent and lymphatic in all that concerned the fiercer life of the emotions, perhaps not so much from temperament as from a lurking feeling, which he had always cherished, that fate held in reserve for him a passion and an ideal. He had been once or twice almost in love ; yet somehow or other the chance had slipped by him, and he had come out of two or three dangerous flirtations with married women a little disgusted, and rather bored by the atmosphere of intrigue in which they involved him, but not seriously injured.

It seemed to him now that, without any design on his part, he had been drawn suddenly into an exciting drama, of which the cast had been already arranged and his own *rôle* prepared for him. He had only to listen to the prompter, follow the cues, yield to the strange excitement which possessed him, and which partook of the nature of enchantment,

and go steadily through the scenes till the tragical crisis was reached. The rapidity of the action bewildered him, but the play was as real as his own existence, and the weird touch of the superhuman, which had been brought into it by his vision of Judith, intensified the fascination it wrought. His theory of some occult connection between himself, Judith, and Esmé Colquhoun, whose appearance on the stage was being heralded by the by-play of that evening, was firmly fixed, but to reason upon it was impossible. He could not think out the situation. Never at any time had he been given to analysis. He only knew that he was under a spell, and that a woman, a dream, and an unknown man had suddenly upset his mental balance, and changed the current of his ideas and feelings.

He tossed about for some time in a curious tumult of mind, expecting that something would

happen, yet unable to imagine what could possibly now take place. He lit his candle, but the light irritated him. He got up and paced his chamber, then went into the ante-room, and threw open the shutters. The moon flashed out from the driving clouds, and shed quivering beams upon the little mere. The snow was melting fast, and only a thin white sheet lay spread upon the earth. Water dripped from the naked trees, and the tall cypresses looked like menacing figures emerging from their shrouds. The night seemed full of trouble and mystery. There was no warm breath of life anywhere—all was spectral and silent—all was strange.

Graysett shivered and closed the shutters again. He went back to bed, and lay awake with nerves throbbing till a streak of daylight penetrated through a rift in the curtains. He fell then into a deep sleep and awoke re-

freshed. With clear morning and the common-place sounds around him—the barking of a retriever, and the echo of voices along the corridor—revulsion came, and he almost laughed at his sinister and fantastic thoughts of the night. While dressing he assiduously cultivated a rational mood, and had fairly succeeded, presenting himself under quite a different aspect to the party assembled in the breakfast room, who had mostly begun by looking upon him as somewhat removed from their sympathies, and were not prepared to find him as enthusiastic a sportsman as Rainshaw himself. Graysett discovered that he was taking the most cheerful interest in the day's prospects, and in the vexed question as to whether pheasants and foxes could by any possibility be reconciled. His pleasant illusions were, however, half dispelled when Judith Fountain put in a late appearance, and

quietly nodded to him across the table. There was a curious smile upon her lips as though she partly divined what had been passing through his mind. He scanned her closely, and observed with a qualm of anxiety how absent and inconsequent was her manner. He watched for her voice, and noticed that she scarcely joined in the conversation, and that her eyes for the most part rested upon vacancy. Rainshaw was right: she did look strange—she was uncanny. But at that moment a remark of Mrs. Borlase elicited from her a reply so curiously to the point, that it appeared as if all the time she had been quite aware of the underplay of thought in the circle. Her smile was now so sweet, and her appearance so altogether charming, that he could not help looking at her in wonder and admiration. She was dressed in a downy sort of white serge, which enhanced the limpid clearness of her gray eyes and the

extreme delicacy of her complexion ; her long slim hands looked hardly human, her willowy frame scarcely equal to supporting her height. He thought of a flake of snow, of a white lily, of several other things which suggest purity, and unlikeness to all that is sensuous and earthy.

A little later, when the gentlemen were loitering about, inspecting guns and making ready for a start, he saw her by the fireplace in the hall, buried in a deep arm-chair with a book in her lap. He came and stood near her, resting one elbow upon a piece of projecting oak. He looked very tall and rather masterful in that attitude. As a matter of fact he was a handsome man, and his bronzed yet refined face and soldierly bearing gave him an air of distinction.

‘ You are cold ? ’ he asked.

‘ I am always cold,’ she answered, with a

little shiver. 'There's something in me that will never let me get warm. Shall you like shooting pheasants as well as killing tigers?' she asked abruptly.

'I'm afraid that I have not shot many tigers,' he answered. 'I like all sport.'

'Killing anything, in fact?' she said. 'That's a man's instinct. Women have it sometimes, but they are obliged to keep it under. I hope you will shoot a great many birds since you like doing it. I think that we are coming out to luncheon with you, and then I shall hear what you have done.'

She looked down again at her book; but he still lingered. Presently she glanced up. 'That was a strange talk we had last night. I think we had better forget it, and the dream too. The dream was very curious; I wish it had gone a little further—revealed something more. You are sure that there was no cata-

strophe—no explanation? There was only my look of terror, and the feeling of cold horror—no end?’

‘That was all. There was no end.’

‘Well, we had better not think of it—that is, after the Holmborough ball. You shall tell me then whether it was Esmé Colquhoun who came into your room and took you to my house. Should you like to come with me some day, Major Graysett, and see the house?’

‘I should, very much indeed.’

‘Then I will take you some time when we are in London together. You are not going back to India yet, are you?’

‘I hope that I shall not go back for a year or more. I have been in harness a long time. I want a holiday.’

‘I suppose,’ she said in a listless voice, ‘that it is not necessary for you to remain in harness. I hope not.’

‘I have some money of my own, if you mean that,’ he answered bluntly, ‘but not a great deal.’

‘Do you see,’ she said, after a pause, ‘those two little blue flames leaping up, one on each side of that black log?’—she nodded towards the fire—‘almost joining each other, and in an instant dying down to nothing. They will never blend till the wood is burned away to ashes, and then it will only be for a second. After that, they’ll have disappeared too.’

‘Well?’ he asked, for she said no more.

She looked at him intently. ‘Nothing. I have only said one of the things for which people call me stupid. Major Graysett, do you think it is wise, when you have a very strong impulse, to obey it unquestioningly.’

‘Surely it depends,’ he replied, ‘upon whether the impulse is for good or evil.’

‘It is so difficult to define what is good or

evil. My theory is that people ought to be true to themselves whether in goodness or in what the world might call badness ; to follow the law of their own nature which is settled by some higher authority than their weak will. Some flowers give out a sweet perfume, others a disagreeable one. Some animals can be made pets of, others are ferocious and bloodthirsty. A strong love, a strong hate, or an overpowering impulse towards a particular course of action, implies strength and individuality. It means that you are not merely a mirror reflecting what is before you. I always obey an impulse when it seizes me ; but *I* follow *it* ; it is never strong enough to drag me. I'd give anything to have a very strong impulse. I would yield to it gladly. It might do what it would with me.'

'That is a very dangerous doctrine,' said Graysett. 'But you would be safe in one

respect. I don't think you would ever have an impulse to do what was wrong, and perhaps your truest guide might be your own nature.'

At that moment Rainshaw appeared.

'Come along, Graysett. This loafing is against all my principles; but it is next to impossible to get Fred Romer under weigh. Miss Fountain, you are coming out to lunch with us at the keeper's hut by Brindly Wood. I am sorry to interrupt so improving a conversation. You can continue it there.'

They went off, leaving Judith to her book. The guns made a great deal of noise that morning; and by two o'clock long rows of brown and gold plumaged birds lay stretched beside the dark line of wood. There was much stir and merriment round and within the keeper's cottage, where ladies, hot Irish stew, brown sherry, and other good things awaited the sportsmen.

Judith Fountain was there, having exchanged her white dress for close-kilted cloth, and wearing a sealskin hat in which she seemed less like the creature of another sphere ; Lady Romer in dark red ; Mrs. Borlase in a picturesque costume quite different to that of anyone else, carrying her sketching-block ; the rest in order. It was a pretty scene, the men like most Englishmen looking their best in shooting gear, hungry, hearty and excited. Wine and chaff flowed freely. A great blazing fire threw gleams into the dark corners of the hut, which was lined with wood, and ornamented with stuffed birds, arms and woodland trophies. The windows were wide open, and the clear frosty air rushed in. Here and there outside in the shady places lay a sugary coating of snow, while the wintry sun, a pale gold orb, shone through naked interlacing boughs, down upon keepers and beaters, and into a small rivulet which,

swelled by the melted snow, brawled in miniature cascades over a bed of stones.

At three o'clock they were in line again, and the wood was alive with the noise of beaters and dogs. Each lady, with the exception of Mrs. Rainshaw, who was too tender-hearted to witness the massacre of innocents, and Miss Geneste, who bore her company, had attached herself to one of the guns. Judith Fountain stood beside Graysett, to whom had been allotted one of the best positions at the end of the covert.

And now shot rained like hail, and then there were excited cries of 'Ware hen!' and a succession of quick, sharp volleys, almost drowning the rapid whirr with which the startled bird rose, only to fall again. Graysett was shooting well, and felt some elation at the thought that Judith must remark his skill. She looked a little pale, but during

the first lull congratulated him upon the certainty of his aim. A woman may profess horror at such indiscriminate slaughter, but she always admires the man who excels in it.

‘I’d rather shoot tigers,’ said she. ‘You would have the satisfaction of feeling that you were destroying an enemy to mankind. It is wanton cruelty to kill these pretty, harmless things.’

Nevertheless at the second onslaught she grew excited, and her quick eyes and ears marked the p-r-r and flight of several birds, which might not otherwise have fallen to Graysett’s gun.

They two walked home together, the party dividing into two detachments, one of which chose the way through the village, and the other a longer round by the unused avenue. Graysett and Judith were among the latter. They lagged somewhat, for Judith’s movements

were not energetic. The dead leaves and moss made a springy carpet to their feet, and the winterly wind, fresh but not violent, blew chill in their faces. At first they did not talk readily. [Judith was in an abstracted mood; but Graysett felt that their thoughts were running in the same groove. They paused for a moment, and turned with their faces from the wind, and their eyes met. The sympathy between them seemed expressed by her smile, which appeared to answer his inward reflection upon the rapid strides of their intimacy.

‘I thought that you looked ill and worn at breakfast this morning,’ said she with her usual directness, ‘much more so than in the evening. Did you sleep well last night?’

‘No,’ he said simply; ‘I was awake nearly the whole night.’

‘I can’t bear to lie awake,’ she said, ‘I get so cold and so frightened—as though there

were things round me. I want, then, to say my prayers ; but I can't pray well, I have never been taught. My uncle, you know, is a disciple of Herbert Spencer. It is one of his favourite speeches that he will never do anything which might strengthen the hands of the clergy ; and so none of us ever went to church. My father was the same, consequently I don't know much about the Christian religion in a practical way—so I have had to make out a religion for myself.'

'How did you set about doing that?' asked Graysett, feeling a profound pity for this young creature, whose melancholy frankness touched him to the soul.

'Oh, I read all the books of philosophy I could get hold of. You would be amused if you could imagine the jumble in my mind at one time. I have never had much education, in a solid sense. I have always wished that I

had been taught science and Euclid, and that sort of thing. It would have given me something to fall back upon. I think my mind is logical to a certain extent. Why do you smile?’

‘I should not have thought from my very slight knowledge of you that you are exactly logical. I should have fancied from what you have said, that you form your opinions rather by intuition than reasoning.’

She seemed to reflect.

‘At any rate,’ she said after a pause, ‘I am very fond of philosophy, and of things which most people consider dry and uninteresting. I remember when I was quite a child poring over a book called “The Art of Reason,” and trying to resolve life into Aristotle’s categories. But I very soon left off the Aristotelian method, and took to the Platonic instead. I read all I could of the old Greek philosophers, and then I studied the German ones,

and became transcendental for a time. After that there was a phase of Herbert Spencer, and Comte, and Protoplasm. But Protoplasm would not satisfy me, or prevent me from waking up cold and terrified, and longing to pray to something; and I could not pray to Protoplasm. And then I read Swedenborg, and afterwards many other mystical books; and then——' She stopped suddenly and walked on for a few paces silent.

‘And then?’ he repeated.

‘Oh, do you care to listen to my nonsense? It is all nonsense, you know, and just my fancies, nothing else. It seems to me that the people who are searching for God look into a mirror, and see nothing but their own hearts and minds. The only truth in the world is in ourselves—a tiny flame which grows and grows, and penetrates all through us, and warms and fills us with a wonderful peace, the

more we go on *feeling* prayer. That's my way of praying when I'm alone, cold and frightened, and when it's dark—I am never afraid in daylight. I can't *say* anything. I can only *feel*, and fancy a great glorious sea of light and truth and joy, upon which I'm rocked and warmed, and from which all bad, base things flee away, all evil thoughts and influences that are not pure. I don't care whether Things'—she laid a peculiar emphasis upon the term, as though she meant more than an abstraction—'are what people call good or bad. I only think whether they can live in that light. It's softer than the sunlight and it's so gentle. Oh, I like looking straight into the heart of electric lamps! That is something like what I mean if you can imagine a universe of it.'

'My poor child!' Graysett murmured almost below his breath.

‘No, I know what you are going to say; but don’t. I could never have any other religion than that one. I like my own. It is abstract, impersonal, just what I am myself. Well, *I* slept very soundly and sweetly last night. Tell me, what did you do while you lay awake?’

‘I thought a great deal about our conversation, and of the way in which you affected me.’

‘How do I affect you?’ she asked.

He laughed. ‘I can’t be analytical like you. I don’t know. There is something strange and not quite natural about my feeling towards you. The whole thing is strange. There was my vision, and then our talk last night.’

‘I daresay that you have a very vivid imagination,’ said Judith.

‘I never suspected it till I met you. Since

then, everything has become vivid, and a great deal seems to have happened. I can hardly believe that we met for the first time yesterday.'

'Perhaps it means that we are going to be friends.'

'I don't fancy that friendship comes on in that way. It does not take possession of one all at once, nor is it ushered in by portents and visions. It is a much more common-place and better behaved sort of sentiment.'

Judith laughed. They had reached the end of the avenue, and were standing in the shelter of an old ivy-clad wall. There was a stone bench in the angle, well protected from the wind.

'Let us rest here for a minute or two,' she said, 'I am very tired. I get easily tired.'

They sat down, Judith remaining for some moments perfectly still, her hands resting in

her lap. These attitudes of complete repose were a peculiarity of hers. Presently one of the retrievers which had followed them from the keeper's cottage came close, fawning upon Graysett, who patted him carelessly. Judith made a gesture of disgust.

‘Send the dog away,’ she said.

‘Do you not like animals?’ asked Graysett in surprise.

‘No,’ she replied. ‘They—I’m not human enough, I suppose,’ she added abruptly.

Graysett led the dog to a little distance, and gave him into the charge of one of the gardeners. When he returned, Judith had risen.

‘I feel it damp,’ she said. ‘We will walk on by the yew trees for a little way. It is dry and sheltered there.’

They moved down a side path in the shrubbery, and presently emerged upon a sort

of raised terrace leading towards the church. It was roughly paved and shadowed on one side by funereal yews, from which the moisture dripped to the ground beneath. Judith walked on for a few minutes silent and abstracted. Suddenly she said, but without turning towards him—

‘I’ll tell you, if you like, about the curious feeling I had the first time I saw Mr. Esmé Colquhoun.’

Graysett felt almost shocked at his own eagerness. But he restrained it, and said quietly ‘Please do. You interest me intensely.’

CHAPTER VII.

JUDITH began—

‘I was full of the mystical books I had been reading at that time. The American woman I told you of had roused my desire for occult knowledge, till it had become a craving. She told me, when I pressed her, that I was a sensitive, a *clairvoyante*, and that I had psychic force. I could not understand why she refused to help me in developing the power. I wanted to do so. I cultivated Lady Romer, who goes in for new sensations, and went constantly to Mrs. Borlase’s Thursdays, where one meets people out of the common. It was there that Esmé Colquhoun was intro-

duced to me, though of course I had heard of him and had seen him at parties.'

'Is he inclined to mysticism?' asked Graysett.

'Oh, no. At least he was not then. He wrote very impassioned verses and raved about the worship of the beautiful—so they told me. He was a disciple of Théophile Gautier; and began talking to me then about the French school of literature, as though he were giving a lecture. It struck me that he was talking very well, and intended to make an effect. I think he fancied at first that I was worth impressing, and was disgusted with me because I seemed to listen so apathetically. But in reality I was keenly alive. He had produced such an extraordinary effect upon my nerves that to recall it sets them quivering. I can't describe it in words—a kind of eerie, excited sensation, like being galvanised, or as if electricity instead

of blood were running through one's veins. I seemed to be out of my body, and yet perfectly aware of everything that was going on in the studio. It was being awake and dreaming at the same time. I had an overpowering presentiment that he was destined to influence me. It was as though unknown forces in me were being put in motion. I felt as if his double and mine were acting together in some thrilling scene which involved my very existence; but what it was, or what it meant, I could not tell. I could see nothing. I felt only the vivid consciousness and thrilling excitement. It was very weird and terrible; but it only lasted a minute, like one of those flashes of previous existence which one has sometimes—lengthened and infinitely more intense. Then, though I felt dazed, I was myself again, listening to him, criticising him, and certainly far more repelled

than attracted by him. That is all. Tell me, what do you think of it?'

'I believe,' said Graysett solemnly, 'that this strange feeling of yours and my vision are warnings from some higher intelligence. I believe that your destiny and that of this man are mingled for evil; and that it is in my power to save you.'

Judith's eyes, in their wonderful clearness, and with no trouble or passion in their depths, met his full.

'I knew you would say that; I can read your thoughts—at moments quite distinctly. I can see how interested you are in me. You are good and loyal. I am sure that you would be a faithful friend, but I am sure also that it would be much better for you not to care what happened to me.'

'That is quite impossible,' he replied. 'I will guard you from injury, as far as lies in my

power. It is a charge which has been committed to me. This is how I interpret my vision.'

'But you cannot yet know whether it is of Esmé Colquhoun that I must beware. Certainly my acquaintanceship with him so far does not warrant your belief.'

'I shall know to-morrow evening,' he answered.

She turned, shivering slightly. 'Let us go in ; I am cold.'

'Have you ever had any return of the feeling?' he asked, as they strolled round by the little lake into the carriage drive.

'No. What I said to you last night is perfectly true, I am outside Esmé Colquhoun's circle. I don't cause him an emotion—nor has he caused me one, since that night,' she added, laughing softly. 'I have only a sort of curiosity about him. It is mixed with contempt, I

think, although I admire him, and can realise the fact of his influence. I fancy that, if he were in earnest about his life, he might seriously impress me. As it is, I seem to see through his artificiality, without in the least getting at his real nature. I have tried by way of experiment to read his thoughts, as I can often read those of other people, but have always failed. His mind is a blank to me. I think that he has a strong magnetic power, and feel almost sure that it would operate upon me under certain conditions, but I don't know what they are.'

They had reached the house, and Judith left him.

Coming out of her room half an hour later, she saw Mrs. Borlase in a recess of the gallery which overlooked the hall. Judith's soft white draperies made no noise upon the carpet.

Mrs. Borlase was rapidly dashing in an harmonious bit of background. She was very intent upon her work, and looked singularly handsome as she bent over it, her thick curly hair falling upon her forehead, and her long lashes contrasting with her creamy cheek. She was dressed in a brocade tea-gown of some rich nondescript colour, which might have been taken from a wardrobe of centuries back. Her capacity for combining earnestness with the picturesque was marvellous. There was about her an extraordinary mental strength and vitality. She reminded one irresistibly, though why it would be difficult to say, of Georges Sand. She put out her hand and detained Judith.

‘I’ve just finished. You see I don’t neglect business even when I am out on a holiday. This is exactly what I want for a little picture I am interested in.’

‘ You are interested in everything,’ said Judith.

‘ Yes, even with the bores. Work, act, feel, but never allow yourself time to think—that is my philosophy, and it ought to be the philosophy of every woman who has made an irretrievable mistake in marriage, and who loves the world and the things of the world too well to give them up.’

‘ Is that necessary—to be happy ? ’

‘ Yes, and there is a more difficult necessity still—that of inducing the person you want to be happy with, to give them up also—if there be such a person.’ Mrs. Borlase drew back to look at her work, pushed her easel further into the recess, and laid down her brushes. ‘ Life defrauds you,’ she went on ; ‘ but it is its own compensation. Keep a strong hold on life, and you’ll force something pleasant out of it. I have contrived to get a good deal, though

I made a bad commencement. Why do you look at me so curiously, child, with your great dreamy eyes?'

'I don't think that you like me, Mrs. Borlase, and I am wondering what makes you speak so openly to me.'

'Oh! frankness is a principle of my philosophy,' said the artist with a backward toss of her short hair. 'I am a latitudinarian, and I don't profess to go in for nice moral distinctions, though I have my own code of right and wrong which I'll be true to at all costs. I keep the broad rules or appear to do so, and that is enough for the world. I don't pretend to be prudish, or lay claim to the domestic virtues, womanly reticence, and so forth. I don't pretend that I care about my husband, or that I am indifferent to the admiration of other men. I don't tell pretty fibs about the sad necessity for our living apart. I stand fearlessly before

the world as I am, and the world believes in me, and allows Christine Borlase, the Bohemian, a longer tether than it gives most unprotected women. I know my world too well and I love my world too dearly to go beyond my tether. That's understood; and for the rest I "pay my shot." I sing and act and make my studio pleasant, and I am a good comrade to women as well as to men. I'll be a good comrade to you if you choose. You are a strange girl. What has put the notion into your head that I dislike you?'

'Something in your eyes, Christine; and in your tone when you talk recklessly as you do now. It has only come there since I was left a fortune.'

'Jealousy, my dear, jealousy!' Christine patted the girl's hand, and laughed a little discordantly. 'You are wrong. I am so fond of you that I am ready to share my popularity,

which is *my* fortune, with you. I want *you* to take hold of life, and to be less self-absorbed and indifferent. I want to interest you in my friends, and to interest my friends in you. Your wealth has just so much to do with my estimation of you that it sets off your intrinsic value, and gives me an excuse for calling attention to a very charming and original person. Wasn't I always nice to you and anxious to lighten your bondage? But you are improving without my assistance. I observe that you have taken a new departure. If Major Graysett develops in you a taste for flirtation I shall feel grateful to him, but I don't want him to develop anything more serious?'

'Why not?' said Judith calmly. 'Am I the prize in a lottery, for which you have all taken tickets? I feel as though I were being exhibited before the drawing takes place. I should like to show that I have a will of my

own, though I don't quite know how to do that. Why should you object to Major Graysett? He looks disinterested. He does not jar upon me. I like him—and I think he has an affinity with me.'

'Truly you have made great discoveries in a short time,' said Mrs. Borlase. 'Have you an affinity with Major Graysett?'

'That is quite another matter,' answered Judith. 'I am an insoluble substance. People don't affect me seriously.'

'I think that Major Graysett has affected you; and I give him credit for great cleverness. But don't be too hasty in deciding. What would happen if after marriage you discovered yourself capable of an affinity—with someone else?'

'I should feel that it was a law of my being, which must be obeyed.'

'A dangerous creed, dear, if it were sanc-

tioned. My philosophy would be necessary as a corrective. But I quite believe you. You are capable of anything morbid and dramatic. That man, however, is neither morbid nor dramatic. You had better wait for your affinity. Depend upon it he is not far off. Giants cast long shadows.'

She ran lightly down the stairs. Judith followed a little more sedately. The hall, illuminated with rose-shaded lamps and leaping fire gleams, presented an attractive picture. It was alive with the rustle of draperies, the soft laughter of women, and the gruffer tones of a large party of gentlemen. A dash of pink contrasted agreeably with the deep-hued hangings and dark oak panelling. The Master of the Fox Hounds and one or two other hunting men had dropped in on their way homeward, to hear what had been the day's bag and to recount their own experiences.

The muffins were steaming on their brass tripod; the dachshunds were alert; servants passed to and fro, bringing in relays of hot coffee and buttered cakes; while Mrs. Rainshaw, presiding at the tea-table, chattered in her frank, inconsequent manner.

‘We are all coming to the Holmborough ball, and to the meet the next day, Sir Roland,’ said she, addressing the Master; ‘and I hope you’ll find a fox quickly, and not keep us too long waiting by the side of Dunkley Gorse, for my cobs don’t like standing. If Tom would let me hunt I should not mind waiting, but he has ideas which I wish you would try and argue him out of. Don’t you think now, Sir Roland, that marrying is like signing one’s name to a blank schedule, and that the conditions ought to be specified, especially if you are going to live in a hunting county? Won’t you have some nice hot coffee? Mr. Mar-

grave, what are you doing over there? The London post doesn't go out till eight o'clock.'

'I'm earning my living, Mrs. Rainshaw,' promptly responded Mr. Margrave from a distant writing-table. 'Social articles—smart, caustic, and inclining to pessimism in the season ; genial, sporting, and generally muscular in the autumn ; luxurious in tone, cheerfully philosophic, and tempered by climatic influences in the late winter. That is the sort of thing. I don't know that it's a worse way of getting one's living than any other. To be sure, one has always the alternative of giving up living altogether.'

'Well, keep your article till after you have been out with Sir Roland's pack, or you certainly won't hit off the tone of this part of the world ; and in the meantime come and look after Mrs. Borlase. Since Tom won't let me hunt, Sir Roland, I am going to revenge my-

self by dragging him off to Egypt next month. But travelling is so cockneyfied now, that you might as well be in London as at Cairo—at least so they tell me—I never got beyond Nice. And they say the management of Eastern hotels is atrocious. Is that so, Major Graysett? You ought to know all about everything thereabouts.'

Major Graysett, looking very thoughtful and direct, seemed prepared to enter seriously into the question which Mrs. Rainshaw had not intended to ventilate so thoroughly. But in the midst of his explanation he caught sight of Judith Fountain, and, bringing it to a close, came forward to hand her a chair and otherwise minister to her wants.

Presently the party broke up a little, some betaking themselves to the billiard-room, which opened out of the hall; others lounging in the deep window recesses, and choruses subsiding

into duets as people divided into twos. There was a pretty group on the white mat before the fire, where the young hostess and Miss Geneste built toy castles for a golden-haired baby of two, who had been brought down from the nursery. Christine Borlase joined it for a minute. Never had she looked more womanly or more charming than when she caught up the little creature and pressed her lips to its dimpled neck. Her own short hair mingled with the child's yellow curls, and her handsome face with its finely chiselled mouth, its perfect brows, and clear, frank eyes, which had in their depths an underlying sadness, did not, as she raised it, contrast inharmoniously with the little cherubic countenance that touched her cheek. Christine sighed as she placed the baby again in its mother's arms.

She rose. As she passed Judith's chair she

halted for an instant, and said in her impulsive manner, which imparted to such speeches a naturalness that seemed the outcome of an unsophisticated heart—

‘You were talking of affinities. There’s none so holy as that between a mother and a child. A woman loses a great deal when she has no children.’

She moved on, and seating herself at an old spinet, which was one of Mrs. Rainshaw’s triumphs, extracted from it some quavering melodies, abruptly bursting into a child’s song about a Tom-cat, which was full of quaint humour and spirit.

Judith sat motionless in a high-backed chair, her face turned so that her profile was outlined against the crimson cushion. She was listening to the music and intently watching Mrs. Borlase. She hardly spoke. Once when suddenly addressed, she started violently, and

replied in so absent a manner that her remark sounded almost silly.

Graysett wondered of what she was thinking. He felt profoundly moved, while recalling her chance revelations of her inner life. He drew a pathetic mental picture of this solitary, neglected girl puzzling over the deepest mysteries of existence, with no light but that of her imagination. All sorts of romantic speculations concerning her entered his mind. He wondered whether she had ever loved. Did she possess the capacity for love? How had she learned the cynical worldly wisdom which her speech sometimes betrayed, and which seemed so out of harmony with the spirituality of her appearance? . . .

He took Mrs. Borlase in to dinner, and found his former impression of that lady confirmed by her conversation, which was very frank, very agreeable, but which undoubtedly

suggested an undercurrent of strong feeling. She questioned him as to his opinion of Judith Fountain, and gave him further particulars of the girl's strange bringing up, and of her female relatives, whom she denounced unreservedly. He was wary in his replies ; indeed, it would have been difficult for him to be candid. The artist's candour was, however, almost oppressive.

‘I want you to like me,’ she said, ‘and to like my studio. You will come and see me in London, will you not? I am painting Miss Fountain's portrait, and you shall tell me what you think of it.’

She was very sympathetic ; it was impossible not to be charmed by her manner, which was at once brilliant and feminine. He saw that she had exquisite tact, and could imagine that she would be what she had described herself—a good comrade, and also what few women of

genius are, able so to adapt herself to the strength and weakness of a man of genius, as to become indispensable to him both as a prop and a stimulant. She interested him, though in a very different fashion from her friend; and he could not divest himself of a vague notion that she was destined for a more important part in the drama, the reality of which he now thoroughly believed in, than he might at first have been inclined to assign her.

The party that evening was a small one, and depended for amusement upon poker and a little desultory music. Judith declined to sing upon the plea of fatigue, and retired to the alcove, where she invited Graysett by a look to join her. It had now become evident to him that each guest at Leesholm was supposed to do as he or she pleased; and that very little notice was taken of flirtations, serious and otherwise, which might have provoked

comment in a more starched circle. Not that in Judith's manner there was the least semblance of flirtation ; it had lost its little strain of flippancy, and was grave, often child-like in its simplicity. Their talk was less transcendental than it had hitherto been. They talked of books, music, every-day topics, none of which can, however, seem commonplace when touched by the glamour of dawning love. Her remarks showed feeling and taste, a certain amount of cultivation also ; but it was apparent that she had only a superficial knowledge of general literature. He asked her if she were fond of reading.

‘ Some books absorb me,’ she said ; ‘ but very few. I don't care about subjects, or facts.’

‘ Ideas are better than facts,’ said Graysett, ‘ and it is quite true that the greatest readers are very often the least original thinkers.’

‘I am not original,’ said Judith; ‘I suppose that I am receptive. I take in things without knowing it. I listen unconsciously and afterwards reproduce someone else’s thoughts. I am a sponge.’ Then she added: ‘Did Colonel Rainshaw tell you all about me?’

‘He told me a great deal,’ said Graysett, with a sudden pang.

‘You see I am to be pitied.’

‘Indeed,’ he said, ‘I think that you are greatly to be pitied.’

‘I was a very poor girl six months ago. My aunt and cousins barely tolerated me. People were kind to me in a condescending fashion, but no one thought me worth much notice. None troubled themselves about what I felt or thought. Now I am a very rich girl, and the world has wakened up and troubles itself deeply on my account. I am like the princess whom no one believed to be

a princess till they saw her in her royal robes. I wonder if she ever felt as humiliated as I sometimes feel. But at least she was able to gauge the sincerity of her friends.'

'I wish,' he exclaimed, 'that I had known you before you became a princess.'

'Would that have made any difference?' she asked softly. 'Don't say it would. I think that I believe in you. You would have been my friend just the same. Perhaps I should not have needed one so much.' She rose as she spoke and moved away; and a little while afterwards when he looked for her she had gone.

Colonel Rainshaw shrugged his shoulders significantly when he bade his friend good-night.

'I see that you must "dree your own weird," I shall say nothing. Most people would think you were a very lucky fellow.'

Whatever misgivings Colonel Rainshaw might feel, he was discreet enough to keep them to himself; while his wife, on the other hand, beamed approval and gave Major Graysett every opportunity for enjoying Miss Fountain's society. Under such favourable conditions, to say nothing of the pre-indications of destiny, intimacy naturally ripened rapidly. The following day was spent in much the same manner as this one, and on the return of the sportsmen in the afternoon, a telegram was found from Mr. Colquhoun, accepting the invitation to Leesholm.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Holmborough ball was always well attended, and was said to be the best hunt ball which took place in the Midlands. When the Leesholm party arrived, the Town Hall was filling fast. It was in an old-fashioned building, and there were curious little recesses, and heavy pillars supporting a gallery which ran along one end. Brilliantly illuminated, draped with bright hangings, and festooned with wreaths of evergreens and flowers, it made a pretty ball-room. Here and there were banks of exotics, and tall palms and feathery ferns filled up the corners. An immense mirror reflected the glassy floor, the airy figures in tulle and lace, the sparkle of jewels, the lustre

of satin, and the scarlet coats and various uniforms of the hunting men which gave character to the scene.

A country ball contrasts markedly with one in London. Here were no languid forms blocking up doorways, no bored faces of *blasé* men, no weary, listless girls, no perfunctory performance of duty dances. People came to enjoy themselves, and none did so by sitting still, except perhaps the be-diamonded dowagers ranged on the crimson settees. Sir Roland was there with several brother M. F. H.'s, and many a cheery squire who made a merit of avoiding balls, but always came to this one; while a good deal of hunting talk went on, and much county business was transacted to the inspiring strains of the 'Fox Hunt' galop or the dreamy music of a German waltz.

Every now and then, a well-dressed party from some great house in the neighbourhood

would enter, and stand conspicuously by the doorway for a moment before joining the throng. Now an undertoned murmur would announce the presence of a celebrity, or a faint buzz of comment would follow the passing of some country belle unknown to fame. There were the two or three 'beauties' about whom everyone talked, and the fashionable contingent from the great world, with charms artistically heightened, in perfectly moulded satin bodices and floating cascades of tulle, and a string or two of pearls doing duty for sleeves. Then there were the hunting ladies, the recognised Holmborough set, and there were the ladies on the border-land of county society, and those who, not so clever as Mrs. Borlase, went ever so little beyond their length of tether; but, as a rule, the Holmborough Town Hall was upon these occasions a very friendly meeting ground, into which ostracised persons did not venture.

There were no dowagers or non-dancing men in the Leesholm party ; and before they had been many minutes in the room, all were revolving smoothly to the fantastic air of an Hungarian waltz : Lady Romer and Colonel Rainshaw, Mrs. Borlase in the arms of a striking-looking stranger, Miss Geneste and Mr. Margrave, and, lastly, Judith Fountain and Major Graysett.

Graysett waltzed well. Judith's reed-like form yielded softly to his embrace, and seemed to sway in harmony with every beat of the melody. It was like floating through space with a spirit of air. The gentle excitement and dreamy delight which he felt resembled the sensations produced by opium. He would willingly have prolonged the minutes for ever.

They paused at last, beneath a projecting portion of the gallery, where two great stone pillars formed a pleasing background to deli-

cate foliage; and some rich hangings, looped back, disclosed a dimly lighted and fantastically arranged recess. Judith leaned against the pillar, her chest heaving slightly, a faint flush upon her usually pale cheek. At this moment her beauty was undeniable. Her gaze was vaguely fixed upon the moving crowd.

‘I like waltz music,’ she said softly. ‘It affects me even more than funeral marches, which I love also. If I were dying, I should ——’ She stopped abruptly; and he felt her hand upon his arm tremble. A man addressed her in a rolling, flexible voice which he had heard before.

‘Miss Fountain, you are dancing to-night. May I have the next waltz, if you are free?’

Judith turned towards the speaker, upon whose arm Mrs. Borlase was leaning. A thrill passed through Graysett’s frame. He beheld the man whom he had seen in his vision.

A man considerably above the average height of men, with broad, square shoulders, an expansive chest, a statuesque head, and a throat like a column, its outlines clearly displayed by the somewhat Byronic fashion of his loose collar. The face was clean shaven, oval in contour, and clear skinned ; but there was in it no trace of effeminacy. The lips were of the Greek type, cut in firm, sensuous lines, the eyes prominent and heavy lidded, looking half closed, till suddenly the lids contracted, the pupils dilated, gleaming with extraordinary brilliancy, and a light like that of the sun upon the sea illuminated the whole countenance. A mass of red gold hair was brushed back from his forehead, and fell in thick waves to the coat behind. He had a habit of elevating his chin and throwing back his head when he spoke ; then the hairs would separate, quivering, and would stand out like an aureola framing

the face. One saw that this mane was curiously crisp, and might fancy that it possessed the magnetic quality attributed to a cat's fur.

A most noticeable person, who, notwithstanding his long hair, his smooth cheeks, and Grecian profile, was a very Samson in physique, and had also the power of combined intellect and will, a man of exuberant vitality, and who only lacked a certain coolness and subtlety to render him absolutely formidable.

Before replying to his request, Judith glanced at Graysett. Her eyes put a question to him, which was answered in the affirmative. Then she said—

‘I must congratulate you upon your return to England, Mr. Colquhoun; I hope that you enjoyed America. At all events, the Americans enjoyed you, to judge from the newspaper reports.’

‘Why did you not tell us that you were going to lecture in London?’ exclaimed Mrs. Borlase. ‘You know that I never read the papers. We should have gathered *en masse*. We would have taken laurel crowns and would have thrown them at your feet.’

Again there was the suspicious tremble under her light raillery. Colquhoun’s eyes rested upon her steadily as he replied—

‘Because, Mrs. Borlase, I was going to address a company of experts. I could deal with them. I knew what to say. Had you been there I should have thought only of how I could make my subject interesting to you. Where the carcass is, there the eagles gather together; and the vultures swooped down upon me and overpowered the doves who had come to hear. Miss Fountain, I may hope for the next waltz?’

Judith bowed her consent.

‘ You will take one more turn, Miss Fountain? ’ said Graysett.

He placed his arm around her, and bore her into the moving circle. Lights, music, fragrance of flowers, whirling forms, combined in a sort of phantasmagoria; and he was once more in that world of vague fancies and mysterious possibilities which surely exists not far from the actual life, if—and happily this is not so—the spell which gives entrance to it were known to all. They glided on, a fiery hand as it were gripping him, and impelling him to rapid movement. He could not stop. He felt as though he were bearing her away from that weird influence which at this moment he also realised. Colquhoun had strange eyes. They were clear like those of Judith, but they were deeper and brighter. In them was a gleam which hers had not. There was a devil in their depth which had never

lurked in hers. A wild thought flashed into Graysett's mind. Memory, working in her fantastic fashion, recalled a chance conversation which years ago he had held with an Indian mystic. Suggestions contemptuously dismissed then, unheeded since, returned in this dream-like whirl, seizing with startling force upon his imagination. Could it be that there were human beings so constituted that their bodies might become the tenements of certain elemental forces, which by magnetic attraction might again act upon other persons of exceptional organisation? Was it possible that there existed a subtle and unknown current of communication between minds, dependent for its operation upon exact laws? Was all life, all human action, merely a question of soul affinity? . . . And then it seemed to him that he held the links between the seen and the unseen, and that he was struggling for

them with powers invisible. He was contending for Judith's safety—for more than her life, for more than her love. He pressed her fiercely to him, he uttered wild passionate words, which in any saner moment would not have passed his lips—while still they flew on.

‘Stop!’ she cried faintly; ‘it is over.’

They paused, giddy and breathless. To him all seemed moving yet—lights, figures, flowers—and the music was sounding. But presently there came over him a dazed consciousness that the band had ceased, and that the dance was done.

They had halted opposite Esmé Colquhoun and his partner. The man's eyes were fixed upon Graysett with a curious interest, and then they turned towards Christine Borlase, who was watching Judith with an inscrutable look upon her mobile face. Her look was haunting. Could the artist have painted her-

self as she then appeared, her fortune would have been assured, and no critic would have dared dispute her genius. Jealousy, distrust, womanly pity, passionate love, and sublime renunciation might all have been depicted in the portrait, and yet have failed to express the emotions struggling in her countenance. Graysett moved abruptly away, leading Judith to the tent where they had before stood. She was reflected in a mirror at the back. Her hands clasped her bouquet tightly. She was trembling. In her eyes vague terror mingled with excitement. She interrupted him as he began to speak—

‘I know,’ she said. ‘You have recognised him. I knew when you told me your dream the other night that it was he.’

‘Yes,’ replied Graysett, ‘it is he.’ Then he went on in low eager accents, the sentences bursting from him, and giving him no time to shape them.

‘That man will make you love him. He will try to marry you. Will you not be warned? It is I who must warn you—there is no one else—I who must protect you—from myself, perhaps,’ and Graysett laughed discordantly, ‘for *I* too love you. But my love is true. There’s no self-seeking in it, no motive which will not bear the light of clear eyes. Don’t you believe me? It is *you* I love, not your wealth—your happiness is more precious to me than my own. Why? I don’t know. Instinct—affinity perhaps. You are right. We are encompassed by mystery. There are unknown spheres above and below us. It is when we touch them that we are called mad. I think that you have turned me mad. Yes, I love you; but it’s like nothing I’ve ever known of or dreamed of. It’s not your face, or your smile, or your strange talk, which attracts me, or your loneliness, though there’s

something in that ; for I declare to you that you often seem to me like a child set in the midst of dangers which you only dimly suspect ; and I want to take you in my arms and bear you away into safety. It's something much more strange and subtle. . . . See ! I have known you for less than three days, and I am talking to you in this wild way, and from my very soul. This is how I feel about you. It's fatality. Before I had seen your face you had touched the very springs of my being. I had only to come within the circle of your presence and you developed in me a new sense. It's with this sense I love you—and that's no bodily one. To-night there are only three people in the universe for me—you, him, and myself. A week ago our destinies were absolutely apart. To-night they are mingled by an influence I can't profess to understand. I am between you and him.

His power over you is baleful to you. I *know* this. I don't reason about it. There are laws about which we can't reason. We can only obey them. You will obey? You will be warned?'

Judith met his feverish gaze with a calm, rapt look in which there seemed a sort of far-awayness, as though she had not fully realised the import of his appeal; or rather, as if the torrent of his passion had swept by without causing a shock to her sensibilities, and she had seized only upon the abstract idea which underlay his wild declaration.

'Ah!' said she with her peculiar smile, 'Birth is a law; Death is a law; and Affinity and Antipathy are laws; but we don't decide when they are to be put into operation. I want to be governed by the strongest force that is in me. I'll not rebel against that. I have never had an impulse which seemed irresistible.

When it seizes me I shall obey it. Why do you warn me? Against what? You are stretching out a hand into the darkness. That is all.'

'You believe in spiritual potencies,' he began.

She shook her head. 'I want it explained; I don't know.'

'You believe in a sixth sense which brings us into connection with the occult world. Put it in that way. How do you account for my vision? Does not that give me the right to warn you? I had not seen either you or Esmé Colquhoun. What cause had I for supposing that danger threatened you through him? Yet no reasoning would ever shake my conviction that he will be fatal to you unless I can succeed in counteracting his influence. I have told you that I love you. You may scoff at a feeling which has grown so rapidly.

That does not matter. The feeling is there. I can't ignore it. It is myself.'

'I could not scoff at you,' said Judith gravely. 'You interest me too deeply. I cannot help thinking of you, and wondering if indeed you are destined to play an important part in some crisis which is impending. You know that I also have had a presentiment. I had never talked about it till you questioned me. I was sorry afterwards that I spoke so frankly. I used to fancy that I was not impulsive. I see now that I am very impulsive—in little things; I have fallen in with your mood quite naturally from the beginning; and the position, which is very unnatural I suppose, does not seem so to me. It would be an impossible one if you were not true. You may try any experiment you like upon me. I want to feel; and if you become false, I shall be able to tell that you are so.'

‘You consent to try and love me.’

She laughed in her strange way. ‘How can I consent to that of which I have no knowledge? I am cold. There is no flame here;’ she laid her hand upon her breast as she spoke. ‘See me,’ she added, standing erect before him, like a spirit in her white dress, and gazing at him with great eyes as clear and cold as the diamonds on her neck and in her hair, ‘I am colourless. I am hard. I am like Galatea before she became human. I have never loved. I have never felt. I have never lived. Make me feel. Warm me. Put fire into me. I am willing that it should be so.’ The musical voice deepened and intensified. ‘I think that someone with a will strong enough might give me life—that life. But no will has yet been strong enough. No one has come to me with the power. When he comes, I will obey him.’

‘I have come, Judith,’ cried Graysett. ‘And the flame in my heart burns fiercely enough to warm even yours into life.’

‘I am afraid,’ she said slowly, almost regretfully, ‘that you have not the power. It will need great force. Listen. All my life it has been the same. Nothing—no one—has been quite great enough. People were not strong enough—or not quite true. Music might always have been more glorious, poetry might have been more divine, mountains higher, and the sea more vast. There was never enough. Nothing filled me quite. But I always felt that there would come something some day which should drag me imperiously from everything that had gone before, and be a will in me and fill me so that I should be satisfied.’

They stood silent for a few moments. Her head was bent over her bouquet. She sighed

gently. She looked so plastic, and yet he knew that her words were true, and that marble was not colder. A feeling of helplessness and despair came over him and calmed his excitement. He knew intuitively that her estimate of him was a just one, and that he was not strong enough. He had never willed for more than the desire of the hour. He had never cultivated intensity of purpose. He had drifted through life; and, now that the need for strain had come, there was not the power to sustain it.

They had drawn more into the shadow of the tent. At that moment the curtain between the pillars swayed slightly, but neither of them noticed the movement.

‘You may be right,’ said Graysett, ‘or you may be wrong. It is too soon yet to be proved. We shall see shortly.’

‘I have a warning to give you,’ she said

abruptly; then added in a lighter tone, 'Let us talk a little less tragically. You show a great deal of skill in making yourself appear dramatic; and,' she smiled as if to herself, 'you contradict all Mrs. Borlase's theories.'

She waited as if expecting him to ask what these were; but he did not do so, and she went on: 'You affect my moods. You make me talk in a way that is certainly unusual. I hope you are aware that I can be beautifully conventional upon occasions. I am always so to Colonel Rainshaw, and to some other people. That is why I am called stupid.'

'What makes you harp upon that fancy? It seems to me that you are a source of deep interest to everyone.'

'That,' she answered, with her cynical air, 'is since I have come into my kingdom. For example, I always used to go to Mrs. Borlase's

parties. I enjoyed them. I liked watching her. But she never really thought about me till I became worth studying; and now I puzzle her.'

'As a study you are absorbing. I am surprised that Mrs. Borlase, with her keen insight, did not find this out sooner.'

'She is a very clever woman,' said Judith, thoughtfully, 'and a very unhappy one. I am sorry for her.'

'But your warning?' said Graysett. 'That is of importance to me.'

'My warning!' she repeated, as though she had forgotten to what he referred. 'Ah! you might interpret your vision as a portent of danger to yourself, and a warning to avoid me.'

'I have thought of that,' he answered, gravely.

'Have you considered that you too are

venturing into the undiscovered country, and that there may be peril for you as well as for me?’

‘No matter. I go hand in hand with you to explore.’

‘I wonder,’ she began thoughtfully, and paused. ‘I know that I have a gift; but I know that I cannot develop it alone. Perhaps, as you say, we may explore hand in hand—and. . . . But I will be frank with you. I am certain that Esmé Colquhoun has the power, if he choose to exert it, of influencing me in an extraordinary degree. It may not be for my good, I don’t know. I only feel that there is the power; and—I’m like a moth, you will say, eager to rush into the flame—I have a curiosity to test it. Our minds have never been brought into direct contact. Perhaps they never may be. Sometimes I think—the thought has several times

flashed through me—that *you* may be the link between us.'

'*I?*' cried Graysett, excitedly. 'Heaven forbid!'

'Why not? I had not met Mr. Colquhoun for months. Our grooves lay quite apart. You appear—you have a strange vision in which we are closely connected. Immediately afterwards he is invited to stay in the same house with me. It's all strange, uncanny. Consider whether you had not better leave me alone, and escape from the atmosphere into which I have drawn you.'

Graysett laughed bitterly. 'Too late. The spell has worked quickly. I am not my own master.'

The fiddles began to wail in a sort of sobbing prelude, which was indeed the introduction to Judith's own waltz. To Graysett the sad little air had now a weird significance.

Judith listened with head bent as though she also were affected by the music.

‘This is Mr. Esmé Colquhoun’s waltz,’ she said; ‘the first time he has ever asked me to dance.’

‘He will hold you in his arms, he will magnetise you with his touch.’

‘Not at all. He will take me to a seat near Mrs. Borlase; and he will talk to me about the American conception of the beautiful. It is a recognised thing that Esmé Colquhoun never dances.’

She glanced at the mirror and started. Graysett followed her eyes. Esmé Colquhoun, leaning in a picturesque attitude against the pillar at the entrance of the tent, was reflected in the glass.

It was impossible to tell from his expression how much he had heard of the conversation. He advanced to Judith.

‘There is magic in your music, Miss Fountain. We have never waltzed together. Will you try me now?’

The *tableau* was a curious one. Like a statue with living eyes, Judith stood between the two men. These confronted each other. Colquhoun, massive, erect, commanding, with his aureola of red-gold hair, his fiery glance, his noble, almost inspired face, in which there was, notwithstanding its beauty, something sinister and suggestive rather of fallen Lucifer than of an archangel. Graysett, dark, refined, every nerve on the alert, steadily watching his foe. No word had been spoken, but the eyes of the two men had met. They understood each other, and a challenge was mutely given.

The notes of the waltz swelled in mournful crescendo. Colquhoun offered Judith his arm. She looked up at him as though he had awakened her from a dream, and accepted it.

As they passed on, she cast a backward, enigmatic glance at Graysett. He watched them glide into the centre of the hall and mingle with the dancers, Colquhoun threading the maze with extreme grace, his fine head towering above all others like that of a young Hercules; while Judith, held in his embrace, seemed to yield herself with languorous delight to his guidance, the two forms floating rhythmically to the passionate harmonies of the violins, the two hearts, as it seemed, pulsing in perfect accord. It was the poetry of movement.

A sound in the tent behind him, resembling that of a suppressed sob, broke upon Graysett's agitated reverie. Looking round, he perceived Christine Borlase, who had entered noiselessly from behind the curtains. A strange fancy struck him, that, like a stricken doe wounded to the heart, she had crept hither from the

gaze of hard eyes. She was very pale, and her hand pressed her side as though she were in physical pain. But the collected manner in which she spoke, though it did not remove his suspicion, filled him with admiration of her courage.

‘They manage these little retreats very nicely here, don’t they, Major Graysett? Do you like that waltz of Miss Fountain’s? It makes me melancholy. It’s an invocation to ghosts one had hoped were laid long ago. Ghosts have an unpleasant knack of springing up at times—I suppose one never really gets over one’s illusions ; and we artists are impressionable, you know, we should not be artists if it were otherwise. There’s no music so sad as waltz music, none that describes life so well. It always gives me a weird feeling, that the spectres of my dead hopes, dead affections, dead aspirations, are keeping time to my steps

—each note a tender thought, a bright fancy, a pure ambition—everything that the heart has given to the being it loved best—and all gone—all gone. . . .’ Christine paused. There were tears in her voice. She laughed in a jarring, uncertain manner, which betrayed rather than hid how deeply she was moved. ‘I am the sport of my dreams, Major Graysett. That again comes of being an artist. When I am at work I put all my “phases” on to canvas. At idle times they are apt to transfer themselves to real life, and one weaves morbid poetry round two such perfect dancers as Esmé Colquhoun and Judith Fountain.’

There were faint streaks of light in the east, lying level with the horizon. Out of doors, a milky white vapour was crawling slowly upon the skirts of night. Even within doors,

in the long corridor at Leesholm, the gray deathly dawn seemed to creep through closed shutters and heavy curtains.

The silence was profound. The servants were in their deepest sleep, and most of the guests, tired after the ball, were also slumbering. The rooms leading into the corridor were closed and dark—all except one, from which, through the chink of a door ajar, a pale glimmer of light issued.

This was the small sitting-room, adjoining her bedroom, which had been allotted to Christine Borlase for a studio. It looked warm and cheerful. A fire of mingled wood and coal burned on the old-fashioned dogs; and a shaded lamp stood upon the table, shedding light upon the many feminine knick-knacks which lay scattered about. These seemed each to bear some mark of Christine's individuality, and contrasted curiously with

indications of more serious employment. Some dainty crewel work, a gold and turquoise thimble, roses in a Venetian bowl, Parma violets half dead and filling the room with perfume, drawing-boards, tubes of colour, an unfinished sketch, a mahl-stick, several photographs of a well-known actress, a Claude glass and books and papers, lying side by side with her fan, her tablets and the ornaments she had just taken off.

She was standing by the table in her ball dress. The feathery cloak had fallen from her shoulders, and her beautiful bare throat and statuesque arms were left exposed.

She was gazing vacantly into a mirror opposite, her eyes full of misery, though her features were not set and hard, but gentle and tremulous. She was thinking, not of herself, nor even of Esmé; but of that poetic love, which seemed to have a being apart from

material life, and which she knew neither suffering nor starvation could kill. It is a grand power, that of endowing with a sort of objective existence an ideal love which holds its own against disillusionments. A nature noble enough to love the love for love's sake can never be disillusioned.

This thought passed through Christine's mind, and it excited her to enthusiasm. She threw her arms up suddenly, and tossed back her head against her joined hands. The gesture awoke her to consciousness of her own image, and she beheld herself in a picture which appealed to her artistic sensibilities. The pose, so graceful and unrestrained; the glowing eyes, the half-parted lips, all were admirable, as the embodiment of a phase of passion.

‘Dear eyes!’ she murmured in a kind of impersonal fervour. ‘Dear lips! Dear soul of

a woman ! There's something left to be true to. I'll be true to you.'

She moved away from the mirror, and seated herself in a deep arm-chair beside the fire, her elbows upon its arms, and her face bent forward, the forehead resting upon her clasped hands. Thus she remained for a long time. The lamp flickered and expired, and she was alone with the ghostly shadows which dawn had brought. At last she rose slowly, and went towards the inner room. She paused at the door into the corridor, and ere she pushed it close sighed forth a message into the grayness—

'Good-night, my Esmé. Good-morning. Good-bye.'

CHAPTER IX.

A HUNTING morning, neither clear nor crisp, but such an one as makes glad the heart of sporting man, just windy enough for the scent to carry, with faint gleams of sunshine striking out from between gray clouds, and playing coldly upon the pools of standing water; the rime upon the bare trees turned to dew; the air damp and yet exhilarating; the ground moist, and the landscape showing that haziness of outline which is often more poetic and suggestive than the hard distinctness of a frosty scene.

A long brown road crossing a stone bridge vandyked, as old bridges hereabouts are. Beyond, a straggling picturesque village, and

entering it, a lengthy string of riders trotting cheerfully to the meet.

Ladies in beautifully fitting habits, with breast-knots of violets accentuating the contours of their perfect figures, and with faces as fresh as though they had not been dancing till three o'clock that very morning; old stagers got up for convenience; novices in blue habits and much jewellery; City men with questionable seats and nervous hands; the regular *habitués* on their splendid mounts, looking thoroughly at home, and as if they possessed superior information concerning the day's business; handsome men admirably appointed, wearing that slightly bored and languid expression which may be seen on the faces of the most daring riders across country; veterans in weather-stained scarlet; grooms and second-horse-men leading riderless beasts saddled and with stirrups pulled up; benevolent farmers

jogging heavily along ; and behind, all the tag-rag and bob-tail, which was in the habit of collecting by Barsash Wood on the day after the Holmborough ball ; while every now and then a smart barouche filled with fur-wrapped ladies, a dainty victoria or brougham, containing some more delicate matron, would dash by, outstripping the ruck of gigs and pony carts : past a windmill on the outskirts of the village, and down the irregular street with its thatched cottages and ancient-looking ale-house. On the wide green the hounds were gathered, the Huntsman in his black velvet cap and scarlet coat in their midst, and the whips keeping guard. Here was assembled a throng of equestrians, and a motley assemblage of foot people ; while conveyances of all sorts, from a baker's cart to a perambulator, blocked up the approaches.

The arrivals gathered thickly. Some great

personages were expected at the meet, which was a late one, and a pleasant buzz of anticipation prevailed. Friendly greetings sounded on all sides, and cheerful allusions to the entertainment of the night before. The Huntsman touched his cap now to one, now to another; and there was the usual interchange of opinions as to the chances of a successful draw. The Master's keen eye made a rapid inspection of his recruits; grooms adjusted girths and stirrup-leathers, and quieted restive horses; and as Mrs. Rainshaw's light victoria, drawn by its spirited cobs, dashed up, scattering the fringe of shoemakers and roughs, no scene could have appeared more animated or picturesque. Mrs. Rainshaw had evidently ingratiated herself with all circles, and her fresh voice, which had undoubtedly a charm of its own, rang sweetly above the gurgle of laughter and conversation, as she poured forth a variety

of discursive remarks. She had a word for everyone, from the Lord Lieutenant to Farmer John Dyke, a local celebrity whom she greatly favoured. He was in the midst of an argument with the Master, and was laying down the law in this fashion: 'That 'ere fox never did go to ground here—nothing of the kind; but I'll tell you what. He managed to get to Knipley Wood; and there, if you like, he *did* go to ground.'

He received Mrs. Rainshaw's salute, and, chivalrously returning it, crossed over to the victoria, observing while he patted the near cob, 'Bless you, ma'am, they do look well, they do,' and added confidentially, 'If you want to see a little of the sport to-day, I'll give your coachman a word or two; for I can guess pretty well that there won't be much done in this draw, and I'm pretty sure of the line the fox will take from Clumping Gorse.'

‘You can’t do better than follow Dyke’s advice, Mrs. Rainshaw,’ said Sir Roland, laughing. ‘He’s generally pretty well informed; I think he has dealings with the foxes, myself; but I don’t think people on wheels will see much of the hounds to-day, and Dyke and I don’t agree about a certain game old fox in Barsash Wood, that I fancy will give us a real good run to-day, if this ruck will only let us get off fair.’

The Leesholm party appeared in full force; and the resources of the stables had been taxed to mount Mrs. Borlase and Miss Geneste, to say nothing of second-horse-men and Mr. Margrave, who could not afford the good things of this life for himself, and therefore expected his friends to provide them for him.

The Romers and Judith Fountain had brought their own horses; and Lady Romer, whose style could be conveniently adapted to

her costumes, had exchanged the Rossetti phase for that of the modern sportswoman. Judith's individuality was not adaptable, but she looked less ethereal than usual, and two vivid spots of colour upon her cheeks heightened her beauty in a remarkable degree. Colonel Rainshaw seemed completely at his ease upon a splendid weight-carrier, and Graysett, mounted on a showy but somewhat impetuous thoroughbred, which had been provided by a local horse-dealer, felt all the excitement of an enthusiastic sportsman, by whom Leicestershire runs have been for some time only enjoyed in retrospect.

‘That’s a good-looking one,’ said Sir Frederick Romer, examining the animal with a critical eye; ‘but he’ll rush his fences, or I’m not mistaken, and will want a little handling. He would not suit my country. You people are all for a stiff quick thing. I like a long slow run. It gives you time to see how much

better you are than other people. But you can generally depend upon Stiggins, and I think, Major Graysett, that he has done you very well.'

'I am not so sure of Stiggins,' said Colonel Rainshaw; and there ensued a short horsey discussion upon certain transactions in which Mr. Stiggins had not distinguished himself. 'I don't agree with you about this country, Fred. Timber is timber, and you know what you are doing; and, for my part, I prefer timber to a stiff bull-finch with a hairy ditch on the other side.'

'Ah!' said Sir Fred reflectively, 'they both require mettle.'

'And money!' interrupted Mr. Margrave.

'I meant the two things, Margrave,' explained Sir Fred, who was given to heavy jokes of this kind. 'A play upon words; do you see? How do you do, Esmé? You haven't

forgotten how to ride over in America, have you, for you'll need to do all you know, if you are on one of De Burgh's brutes.'

Colquhoun laughed. He seemed to enjoy the exercise of power that was needed to control the fiery animal under him; and his admirers might have thrown in the teeth of his detractors that their Apostle of the Beautiful was no mean proficient in manly accomplishments. He sat his horse as though he were a part of it, while his long hair, and certain peculiarities of his dress, were in him rather marks of distinction than of affectation. He attracted a good deal of notice, although perhaps it was not of a sufficiently dignified kind to flatter the vanity of a poet presumably sensitive as to the quality of the homage tendered him. Unfortunately, Holmborough was the winter headquarters of that powerful cabal which had partly succeeded in effecting Colquhoun's social

ostracism ; and a certain great lady at its head, whom he had irreparably offended, was present in the field to-day. Her 'dead cut' was the signal for others to ignore him, and there was an immediate stoniness of expression or an averting of eyes on the part of many, whose caprice he, the idol of the hour, had once been. Colquhoun winced inwardly. It was very petty, but susceptibility to ridicule or feminine affront is an element of the proverbial 'poetic impressionability.' A battle with women is an ignominious sort of warfare, and has about it a touch of the ludicrous ; while the attitude of the combatant with his hands metaphorically tied, suggests that of a whipped cur who dare not retaliate upon his oppressors. A man who is publicly cut by a lady—a leader of fashion and her small court—however morally guiltless he may be, cannot fail to present rather a sorry figure.

Not that there was anything of the whipped cur about Esmé Colquhoun. On the contrary, his bearing was somewhat leonine as he tossed back his mane and faced his enemies. It was quite impossible to suppress his vivid personality, and his dauntless composure forced admiration.

Judith Fountain watched him, feeling a thrill of exultation and sympathy. But she held apart. She did not speak to him, only returning his salutation with a grave bow. Nor did she speak to Graysett, who was observing her intently with a passionate foreboding of the effect which the whole position might produce upon her.

Christine Borlase, her blue eyes flashing and her head also erect, rode forward and with the generous partisanship of her Bohemian nature placed herself by Colquhoun's side as if to declare, 'We are artists and comrades; we

will stand by each other.' Esmé looked down upon her, a curious smile upon his lips, a gleam of deep tenderness in his eyes. The glance which passed between them was full of passionate understanding.

'Always loyal,' he murmured. 'Why are you angry with Lady Langthwaite and her world? I am trying to imagine myself into a state of sublime indifference. You disturb the process.'

'It is an impossible one,' she returned in a very low tone.

'Then rejoice, since I am become more wholly yours.'

'No. You are drawn farther from me,' she said with melancholy emphasis. 'You can never be wholly mine, or wholly the property of any woman. Haven't I often told you that, to you, life without a roar of "Bravo's" would be stark despondency? You can't act without

spectators, and you must be always acting. Ah, my poor Esmé, why did you ever try to be anything but a poet? It was foolish of you to risk losing the world which is so necessary to your happiness.'

'Yet for your sake I offered to renounce the world. It is you who found the sacrifice too great.'

'Ah,' said she cynically, 'we artists are obliged to make so many sacrifices to the gods for inspiration, that we cannot waste any upon our fellow-creatures.'

'The Empress has come,' exclaimed Lady Romer, 'and we are moving at last.'

The pack streamed up a narrow lane, the procession of riders following, and the carriages as best they could—a long line to the crest of the hill, where there opened out a glorious view of sweeping pastures and low meadows divided by bristling fences. There

was a scurry across a piece of furrowed ground, and then some unsatisfactory dawdling, and much wrath expended upon the unruly mob, while the wind on the rise blew sharply, and the sun suddenly shone out, bringing into prominence the knots of red-coated horsemen gathered along the dark line of covert in which the hounds were opening.

The wood rang with music marred by the yells of the foot people. The horn twanged; there was a shout: 'Gone away!' 'He's off!' 'Tally-ho!' and a wild scramble through a neighbouring gate and dash across the fields, carriages turning towards the road, excited coachmen holding rapid consultations, and adventurous huntresses on wheels, following as near as they could in the wake of the field. The fox had broken on the other side of the wood, which was long and narrow, so that they who had not followed the Master

down the rides were at first in a state of uncertainty as to the direction in which he had gone.

A steep hill led down to the foot of the covert, and here a slight check occurred—a smash, and a halt on the part of the humanely disposed. A pony-cart had come to grief: the pony staked by the shaft, and a girl in a brown ulster lay huddled on the ground, with a gentleman in pink, who probably anathematised his bad luck, pouring brandy down her throat. A pause ensued, long enough to make sure that there was no serious injury, and then the rush onward again, madder than before, for by this time the hounds had gained considerably, and the pursuers who had been fortunate enough to get away with them were happily careering over the open country to the right; while the laggards had before them two or three ploughed fields and some unnegoti-

able-looking jumps, which might have been avoided by foresight in the first instance.

Major Graysett, one of these unfortunates, presently found himself riding beside Mrs. Borlase, the only other one of the Leesholm set who had not secured a good start. She had candidly confessed to not being in form that day ; and her horse having ignominiously baulked one stiff place, she had been prudently availing herself of conveniently placed gates. ‘ We are rather novices in this country, Major Graysett,’ she said with her charming smile, ‘ and for once Mr. Dyke seems out in his calculations. They’ve started a good old dog fox, and are likely to have a splendid run. No one expected they would find so quickly in Barsash Wood. To tell the truth, I enjoy the riding, but I don’t particularly mind being rather out of it. Don’t you mind me, but take a line across those fields. I think he is

making a ring, and you may find yourself well in yet.'

Graysett's blood was up, and he was not disposed to disregard the advice. It was evident that the fox's movements could not be predicted with any certainty, for now that the stragglers had been left behind, all seemed to be taking different directions, each person apparently animated by the invincible determination to get to the front through the exercise of his individual judgment. Graysett, following the lead of a wiry, well-mounted member of the hunt, the state of whose scarlet coat proclaimed him to be an old hand, gallantly cleared a formidable-looking hedge with an ugly take-off, and began to congratulate himself upon having trusted to the honour of Mr. Stiggins. The chestnut flew over the ground, rising like a bird and before long distancing the veteran, upon whose knowledge of

the country Graysett had done well to rely. The hounds were in sight streaming westward, and not far in their rear some twenty or thirty picked men of the field and about half-a-dozen ladies. He fancied that he could discern Judith's slight figure and Esmé Colquhoun's yellow mane, and grimly recalled Rainshaw's simile, while an intense desire seized him to outdo his rival.

But beyond him there lay a dark line of willows with a white streak flashing between them ; and he was as yet unaware of the fact that the chestnut which could so cleanly fly the fences was absolutely useless at water.

It was in fact one of the most unnegotiable brooks in that part of the country, and might have daunted a rider far more accustomed to following hounds than Graysett. But he was not to be beaten now, and the sight of his late companion pounding along to the right, in the

apparent hope of finding a better place, did not deter him from making the attempt here, though the banks were treacherous and the water wide and uninviting. By so doing, if successful, he must gain considerably, and this was at present his first consideration. He shortened his rein, and woke up his mare with a touch of the spur, for the chestnut was flagging, and did not at once respond to his call. Twice she baulked, three times he urged her forward. The third she made a rush, stopped at the very brink, jumped short, and fell heavily against the bank, rolling upon her rider, and striking out wildly with her hoofs, so that he was at once in imminent danger of both drowning and concussion of the brain.

The old sportsman paused, seeing the accident, and turning, galloped to Graysett's assistance. Several others rode up at the

moment, and among them they succeeded in extricating Graysett from his perilous position. He lay insensible. It was at first feared that he was dead. There was an evident and dangerous injury to the skull; and no one seemed to know what means to take, while a dozen alarming and unpractical suggestions were made by the onlookers. Mrs. Borlase, who had ridden up and was off her horse in a moment, showed more firmness and knowledge than any of the men present. She succeeded in dispersing the crowd; sent one groom off at once to the nearest village, which was not far away, and where there was happily a doctor, and another to a neighbouring farmhouse for a mattress and conveyance; then, with the assistance of those gentlemen who had remained, did what she could towards restoring the injured man to consciousness—apparently a hopeless task.

Meanwhile Judith and Colquhoun, by a lucky start among those in advance, were sweeping over the grass-fields, enjoying what proved to be one of the best runs of the season. There were no very serious obstacles to be encountered, and they took the fences one by one as though it had been a hurdle-race, he turning every now and then to note how she fared, she flying on with a sense of mad delight, her pulses tingling as the wind met her face, while the rapid motion and his proximity filled her with excitement, such as she had never known, and produced in her a strange feeling of irresponsibility. She seemed borne along without exercise of will, attracted, as it were, by a magnet which she must follow even to the ends of the earth. The fantastic thought overpowered every other. Whenever they looked towards her, his eyes commanded. It was like an electric thrill; Judith had never

before experienced this sensation. She was caught in a whirl. She could no longer analyse his influence over her, being beyond analysis; it was simply compelling.

There was room for nothing but the exquisite pleasure of feeling absolutely impressed—dominated. This was what she had felt when waltzing with him the preceding evening. The consciousness of him had been with her through the darkness. It was like a delirium in which his voice, his eyes, his hair, the touch of his hand, seemed living things filling the air around her.

They flew over the brook which was a check to many, and now were striding side by side across a stretch of level country. The hounds had bent towards the left, and far off on the crest of a hill was the low dark line of a covert, for which Reynard was making. There in due course he ran to ground, and

escaped with his life. He had earned it gallantly, though the hounds were cheated of their reward.

There was a little uncertainty as to whether another covert would be drawn. The hounds had run in a semicircle, and the distance was not great from the place where they had started. As the council of war was being held stragglers came riding up, and the rumour spread that there had been a bad accident, though no one seemed to know much about it. Colquhoun, who had looked anxious at the news, seemed reassured upon hearing that a gentleman was the sufferer, and rode on with the Romans, who were in high spirits and enjoyment. Judith lingered uneasily, and presently saw Rainshaw hurrying by and looking full of concern. He had heard that it was Major Graysett who had been thrown. Later on, in the road they came upon Mrs. Rainshaw

in her victoria, also bound for the village whither Graysett had been taken. Before they reached it, the report met them that he was dead. This proved to be false. He was still in a state of semi-consciousness, but the surgeon had made his examination, and danger to life was not apprehended. The inn afforded but poor accommodation; and it was decided that he should be taken at once to Leesholm. A kind of bed was arranged in the carriage, and Mrs. Rainshaw and her husband accompanied him to their home. By the time everything had been settled the afternoon was waning. Judith rode back sorrowful and agitated. It appeared to her that fatality had been at work; and this accident seemed a strange ending to the first act in the drama which she also felt was being enacted.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. BORLASE, Colquhoun, and the rest of the party reached Leesholm before the Rainshaws returned with their injured friend. Rumours of the accident had spread — exaggerated at first, but afterwards toned down by the comforting assurance that Major Graysett had not lost his life, and that he would, in all probability, be incapacitated for only a short time.

There appeared nothing to do under the circumstances except get out of the way of confusion. Most of the ladies retired to their rooms, and sipped tea brought them by their maids, while the men drank something stronger in the smoking-room.

Mrs. Borlase was joined in her temporary

studio by Esmé Colquhoun. She had asked him to come. Her attitude was one of expectancy. She stood by the fireplace, her face turned sideways to him as he entered, holding a screen of feathers between her cheeks and the blaze. Her robe of pale-green plush, confined at the waist with an old enamelled girdle, and with soft lace falling away from the neck and arms, suited the almost girlish lines of her figure, while its colour harmonised with her golden hair and dead-white skin. There was a luxuriousness in her dress, in the subdued light, the rich draperies of the chimney-piece, the faintly scented atmosphere, which was more than pleasing, in contrast with the bleak wintry landscape from which a little while before they had entered.

Upon a little table near her there stood in a blue china bowl the crushed bouquet of hot-house blossoms, still fragrant, which she had

carried upon the previous night. Esmé Colquhoun took up the bouquet, which was composed almost entirely of yellow roses, and drew forth one of the flowers with a preoccupied air.

‘You were not perfectly successful last night,’ he said. ‘The gradations of colour were too distinctly defined. That amber dress is not low enough in tone. It was jarring; and *you* ought never to be inharmonious.’

He did not look at her as he spoke, and she stood motionless for some moments apparently not having noticed his remark. Presently she turned towards him, agitating her feather fan with an impulsive gesture, as though she wished to utter some pleading or remonstrative words, but knew not how to phrase her thoughts. She moved a step and stood before him, gazing at and, as it were, through him, with eyes that had that gleaming

yet heavy appearance which is produced by unshed tears.

He laid the rose down and sighed. The action seemed significant. His whole manner was full of sadness. Then his eyes turned very slowly upon her, and opened wide suddenly, dilating with tenderness rather than with passion. The two looks met and clung to each other. In them there was a world of unspoken thought, of lived-out tragedy—the tragedy of two hearts held aloof from satisfaction in each other by certain high and imperious instincts, which are yet strangely blended with worldly scruples—a drama of the age without the grandeur of renunciation, or the reckless insistence upon happiness at any cost, which compels some kind of admiration—a pathetic effort at compromise involving the warring of impulses, the smart of an equivocal position, the perpetual self-buckling, and inevitable weariness of

contest ; the strangulation of sensibilities denied outlet ; and at last the dreary sense that all is bitter-sweet, hopeless, and irreconcilable with the demands of either God or Mammon : renunciation with a sting, but through all, the pure love which is the glory of it and the misery.

They stretched out their hands to each other. ‘Esmé!’ she said with a faint little cry.

Without a word, he drew her to a couch placed at an angle with the fireplace, seating himself near her. He adjusted a cushion, and she leaned her head back against it like a tired child, while he sat silent and brooding, his gaze fixed intently upon the fire. Once he lifted her hand and kissed it, murmuring a word of endearment, but so low that it could scarcely have reached her ears. At last he said aloud, ‘I have hurt you. I have dealt you a blow—brave, loyal, faithful heart!’

She roused herself, and, gazing mournfully at him, said, 'It was I who bade you strike.'

'I have hurt you,' he repeated with remorse in his voice. And then he rose and looked down yearningly upon her. 'Christine, are you still so proud? Will you always face the world so with your frank cynicism—your high-spirited independence—artist and woman of the world in one, giving just so much and giving no more? Christine, will you accept no sacrifice? Will you make none—not even now?'

Christine returned his gaze unshrinkingly; but a tear rose and lay on her lower lashes, held there glittering.

'No, Esmé—not even now. There can never be any question of sacrifice between you and me.'

'There should be none. You are right. Love should be a free sacrament, and its own justification.'

She seemed to reflect for a moment and asked, as though to gain time, 'Why do you say "not even now?"'

'The situation is changed,' he answered.

'That is what I wished. I have thought a great deal about our position towards each other. What happened the night before you went away was a revelation to me. I felt that there *must* be a safeguard—that I was ruining your life. I wish you to marry. It is the only way—for you.'

'For me?' he repeated.

'I take into consideration your temperament—the poetic temperament, which, as you have said complacently, is a problem to itself and to others.'

'Is it supposed,' he asked, 'that the poet delights in going through phase upon phase of emotion? I yearn to arrive at rest—unity. I believed once that I might have done so

through you. I believed this—before I loved you. It was a mistaken idea. Restful love must have in it the essence of marriage. It must contain the elements of passion suspended and transformed into the deep, steady attachment, which may be the fruit of years of marriage, or of the love which transcends marriage. That is the psychology of the matter.'

'Oh!' she cried. 'You would analyse your death-throes, till you ceased to exist.'

There was silence for a minute. 'Think,' said he slowly. 'Would you desire that the man who loved you should wish to place you in the arms of another man? If he could so "wish," you would know at once, by your unerring woman's instinct, that he had never really loved you.'

She started forward. 'I felt that you misunderstood me—grossly,' she exclaimed in

sadness more than in anger. ‘I knew it when I read your letter in reply to mine. Did you give me no credit for sincerity, and for clean motive? It was not with us “soul to soul” then. Didn’t we face the position once—fairly and without prudery as we had a right to do? We wouldn’t have any flimsy veils. It must be the truth and nothing else. And we decided that we were strong enough to try an experiment in which other men and women have been successful. I’ll never think so meanly of human nature as to believe it impossible. At any rate, the experiment was a failure with us. Perhaps it was not meant for poets. Where is the deep tenacious friendship—the intellectual love, of which we dreamed? Where is that larger spiritual insight, gained through annihilation of self, which should claim from our souls a duty to each other? Analysed to nothingness. You left them behind when you

entered the new school. They weren't in keeping with its corruption.'

Esmé laughed softly. 'I admit that the Age is hysterical; and we artists are children of the Age.'

'No,' she said; 'it is we who make the Age.'

'As you will. Do not let us argue about abstractions. At least you know the temperament; and if my frank egotism seems to you brutal, you will approve of its sincerity. Forgetfulness is the tribute which the artist pays to the gods. The man who concentrates the forces of his being upon one sentiment can never give forth a living poem. To long unsatisfied means intellectual stagnation. But the travail of emotion is the birth of innumerable beautiful fancies which enrich the world; and genius owes a duty to the world, and to itself. There must be ebb and flow, crisis and

reaction. You condemn me to reaction and its uncertainties. But you will always remember that the choice was in your power, that it is so still.'

'No,' she exclaimed with some passion. 'What you describe as your temperament places it beyond my power. I know you better than you know yourself. In a month's time—a year's time—I will grant you so long, you would be wearying for the incense which there would be no one to light.'

'I am weary now of my life.'

She laughed a little joyless laugh. 'How much more so if you were confined in a prison! Applause and adulation are the breath of existence to you. The love and loyalty of one woman would never satisfy your nature, except under conditions which would enable you to take impressions from numerous other sources. You will secure for

yourself these conditions. I want you to love your wife. I want you to have the world's incense as well. I want you to touch every point possible in existence. You are the true creature of your own philosophy. You require a thousand sensations in quick succession, and you must analyse each before you can decide whether it is worth experiencing. You profess to worship the ideal; but in reality you are an utter materialist. You have all the weakness, all the inconsistency, all the greatness of a poetic nature. The greatness and the fire kindle in my intellect a spark of the incense you crave. The weakness and the inconsistency touch my woman's heart and make me love you. Being what we both are, sorrow and evil can only come from indulging in our love. This I pointed out to you before you went away; and now I am going to place it beyond our power of indulgence.'

‘That is impossible. You cannot crush down your love for me, nor can I, married or free, prevent myself from loving you. I would not try to do so. You are my inspiration You are to me the ideal woman.’

She was silent for several moments, and her head dropped upon her breast. Presently she looked up with a strange smile upon her lips and a bright light in her eyes.

‘I will remain so. An ideal love is a great and glorious possession. An ideal love is divine and actual, and it exists, it *must* exist, apart from material life. Are not love, faith, will, forces more potent than brute strength? Ah, my Esmé! you, a poet and an artist, know as I do that the realities of existence are not the things we see and touch. Human passion is but the stream in which pure, divine passion is reflected. The more muddy the stream the more distorted the image. Drag down the

star and it disappears. Oh, teach the world this truth in your books! Let me try to show it dimly forth in my pictures. It is the core of our inner lives. It is the pearl of great price, which has been given to us artists. Let us cherish the Ideal. Our outward lives may be false and conventional; but within, there is a sanctuary which should be held sacred. And—ah, Heaven! Every day do we not stumble and fall? Are we not continually yielding ourselves to influences which are debasing? Crisis and reaction! That is true. There is no rest for such natures as ours.'

Her voice vibrated with a passionate tremor. She rose and moved away from him, all the time her gaze never forsaking his face. An exceeding softness and beauty crept over her features, and she went on in a more gentle tone. 'I will be your ideal, Esmé. When you need sympathy in your work, ask it from

me. When you have beautiful dreams, tell them to me. When the fire burns within you, come to me and I will fan it into flame. Give your love to Judith Fountain. She has attracted you already. In time, she will captivate you completely; for she has a subtle charm that must appeal to your artistic perceptions. She can reinstate you in popular favour. She is rich, and can supply the sensuous atmosphere—of dim rooms, Oriental perfumes, soothing music, without which you have often said to me your muse is dumb. But give *me* your soul.'

Colquhoun seemed infected by her enthusiasm. His dramatic instinct seized the conception of a sublime *rôle*. The poet is a paradox. In a moment, he may ascend from the depths of earth to the heights of heaven. His mind seems the tenement of some fantastic Protean spirit with a passion for impersonation,

to which truth and falsehood are of equal value. His potentialities appear capable of manifesting themselves in either good or evil as the wind blows or the sun shines.

‘You are a noble woman,’ he said slowly. ‘You are very strong. If we could have been married, we might have conquered the world together. What is it that you are going to do?’

‘I am going away in a day or two. I shall leave you here with Judith Fountain.’

‘And I—what am I to do?’

‘What your impulses prompt,’ she answered with the least touch of bitterness. ‘It is not for me to guide them.’

‘I think,’ he said, after a minute’s pause, ‘that perhaps your enthusiasm gilds merely trite facts and common-place sentiment. That is the way with us—we artists. Is your

star anything higher than the respect of the world?'

'Oh!' she cried. 'You can't see. You don't comprehend. 'It is my own self-respect. It is your love. If you were a god, Esmé—instead of being a poet; and I an angel, and not a battered, hardened woman of the world, we would fly aloft and seek our star.'

As she spoke, she rose from her couch and came to the mantelpiece, where she stood facing him.

'We will be melodramatic no longer,' she said with a dreary smile. 'There is too much of that sort of thing in your school, and I don't approve of it, you know. You had better leave me now.'

He signified his obedience by a gesture. Again he kissed her hand. There was something in her eyes which entreated him not to claim once-granted privileges.

The coldness of the touch startled him, and roused him to passionate solicitude.

‘You are cold! You are wretched! What have I done? I am hurting you! This means nothing, Christine? This—this is not farewell.’

‘No,’ she answered with an effort which almost choked her. ‘There will never be a real farewell between us—while we are both alive. . . . And—and—I mean to be your wife’s friend, Esmé. . . . I have a right to that vested interest. I’ve done nothing to forfeit it. That’s something to be glad of, isn’t it?’ And she gave a little uncertain laugh, which broke short in a sob.

‘I am cold,’ she said—‘and tired. I shall lie down on the sofa by the fire for a little while before I dress for dinner.’

He arranged the cushions for her head with a tenderness which was almost womanly. ‘What can I do for you?’ he said. ‘Shall I

read you some poetry? Shall I read you to sleep?'

'No, no,' she cried wildly. 'Let me be. I want to be alone.'

He left her silently. The blankness that remained was as the darkness when a flame has gone out.

Christine sank upon the sofa and pressed her hands together, biting her lips to keep down the sobs uprising in her throat. It was just that. It seemed to her that the flame had gone out.

CHAPTER XI.

MAJOR GRAYSETT'S injury, though less serious than had at first been feared, resulted in an illness that sadly interfered with the somewhat fantastic schemes he had formed for Judith's protection against the unknown danger in which he imagined her to be placed. The blow on his head, the shock to his system, or something else unexplainable, brought on a return of the fever from which he had suffered before and since his departure from India ; and for several days he was slightly delirious.

A nurse was sent for from London ; and the wing which contained his rooms was cut off by means of heavy curtains, so that no echoes of the sounds or doings in the other part of the

house could penetrate to his sick chamber. That there was a great deal doing, he understood vaguely. Visitors came and went. Mrs. Borlase had gone to pay another visit in the neighbourhood, but was expected to return later. Esmé Colquhoun's invitation had been extended, and Judith Fountain remained indefinitely.

This was all that Graysett could learn when his senses returned to him. Colonel Rainshaw visited the invalid frequently ; but his reticence and apparent dislike to speaking of Miss Fountain convinced Graysett, if in his weak state his brain were capable of entertaining a conviction, that he had betrayed in his wanderings the deep interest he felt in Judith, and the weird fancies which he had woven round her intercourse with Esmé Colquhoun.

He was right.

The revelation of Graysett's state of mind

occasioned much dismay to Rainshaw, who, however, notwithstanding his perplexity and annoyance, found comfort in the reflection that the vision, his friend's curious forebodings, and the sudden attraction towards Judith were entirely due to incipient fever, and would vanish with his restoration to health. In the meantime it was best to avoid the subject.

During his delirium Graysett had never been free from a vivid impression of Judith's peril. He had imagined her about to be devoured in the arena, or bound as a witch to the stake. His fancy had beheld her delivered over to torturers, stretched on the rack, drowning in open sea, or pursued by monsters. He had seen her in every conceivable situation of horror, and he himself always tied down and helpless to succour her. Even when he awoke to reality, his position appeared no less terrible, and his chamber seemed a transparent cell

through the walls of which, he beheld, in fancy, scenes which heated his blood again to fever pitch.

This condition of things lasted for nearly a fortnight, by which time, though very weak, he was perfectly clear-headed, longing to leave his room, and eager for such information as he could obtain without showing his anxiety too directly. He was reserved, sensitive, and keenly susceptible to ridicule, and it seemed to him that after his heroic protestations he must cut a sorry figure in the eyes both of Judith and of those who suspected his infatuation.

There was something tragi-comic in the whole situation. He was like a soldier kept from battle by the puerile fact that he had cut his hand or sprained his ankle. Destiny was laughing in her sleeve, and trying to show him how unavailing were his efforts against her. Nothing could, he thought, be more humiliating

than his attitude. There was not even the halo of danger to make it interesting. He was simply incapacitated, over-strained, out of order—nerves, brain, and system generally. This was what the doctor told him, and added that the change of climate had been too severe, that he ought to go to the south of France for the spring, and pass his summer among the mountains of Switzerland.

‘I think it is the best thing you can do,’ said Rainshaw cheerily, when the physician had departed. ‘Let us all go to Monaco as soon as the hunting is over; Molly has a hankering after the gaming tables which I’m in duty bound to gratify. That jungle fever plays the deuce with the constitution. There is nothing like perpetual change of air for rooting it out of one’s system. In a few months you’ll be as right as possible.’

Rainshaw spent a great deal of time with

his friend—more than might have been expected considering his duties as host and the claims of his preserves. Graysett was always glad to see him enter the room, for this seemed his only link with the other inhabitants of Leesholm. Not that Rainshaw's conversation gave much insight into affairs. He had not the art of talking pictorially, and had he been inclined to write memoirs of his times, they would have conveyed very little to the unimaginative reader. Moreover, with an elaborate pretence at unconsciousness, he had a way of starting some fresh subject whenever Judith Fountain was touched upon, and seemed to take it for granted that Graysett could only be interested in topics peculiarly adapted to the masculine tone of mind. He always gave an accurate account of the day's bag, the state of his stud, the after-dinner stories which were told, and most particularly those of a certain

Admiral then staying at Leesholm, whose experiences seemed to have been as varied as they were startling, ranging from the abduction of a Mormon bride to the discovery of a new prima donna or professional beauty.

‘D—n the Admiral!’ Graysett had once exclaimed with savage emphasis; and Rainshaw had looked stolid but had not left off his stories. ‘I’m sick of the Admiral and of Sir Fred Romer,’ continued Graysett; ‘they don’t interest me.’

‘To be sure,’ said Rainshaw; ‘Fred Romer’s wife is the most entertaining of the two. She is in capital form now that she has Esmé Colquhoun to admire her when she strikes an attitude, or does her hair in a new fashion. She and Miss Geneste between them make the house lively.’

‘And Miss Fountain?’

‘Judith Fountain would never make any

house lively, unless she spent her money in hiring professional jesters to do it for her. She is bewitched; she is in a dream.'

'How?' asked Graysett, starting up in bed. 'Who has bewitched her?'

'My dear fellow, don't excite yourself; it isn't worth it. You know Miss Fountain as well as I do; at all events, you have made better use of your opportunities for studying her. I dare say it is you who have bewitched her. You awakened her out of a dream for a day or two, and now she has gone back to it again. I can't venture an opinion as to the state of her feelings or her mind; I know nothing about her.'

'You seemed to know a good deal, judging by all you have told me.'

'Oh, those were mere facts which I learned principally through Molly. At present I don't think she would be a source of satisfaction to

anyone who wanted to make a study of her—unless it were an artist meditating an uncanny subject. She sits in a big chair in the hall pretending to read and never turning a page. She hardly opens her mouth ; she stares fixedly into vacancy, and if you came across her in a dark passage, you would take her for a ghost ; and she sings and plays in a weird fashion that gives one the creeps. She does something else : she inquires regularly how you are, and to-day sent you this.’

He produced a little bouquet of Parma violets with a white camellia in the centre, tied together with a knot of ribbon.

‘Really,’ he added, ‘it is a very pretty attention, and from an heiress extremely significant.’

Graysett took the flowers, which were deliciously fragrant. They gave him more pleasure than he could express. The little

nosegay seemed to him like Judith herself, and the camellia heart to typify her coldness and purity.

‘What does Esmé Colquhoun do?’ he asked presently.

‘He shoots, and uncommonly straight, when he takes the trouble to come out with us ; but as a rule he seems to prefer roasting himself before the fire, and dangling after the ladies. He talks—good Lord ! doesn’t he talk !—as though he were being interviewed by a dozen newspaper editors. I suppose he got into the way in America, where they seem to have been always interviewing him. I must confess that his conversation is above the heads of a few of his audience ; but some of his anecdotes, when the ladies are out of the way, are really very good, and quite broad enough to suit all comprehensions. I don’t know that I should call his witticisms always refined. For the

most part, however, I am obliged to take it for granted that he is an exceedingly clever young man. To me he appears like a wind-bag containing a few dried peas, which rattle considerably.'

'You said once that you suspected Lady Romer and Mrs. Borlase of trying to make up a marriage between him and Miss Fountain. Do you think so still?' asked Graysett.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

S & H

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